Sco Ipress

Enterprise — Log Entries

91

Lynn Henricks

a Star Trek fanzine

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THE BALANCE

by Karen Sparks

McCoy was trying as hard as he knew how to banish the dreadful images from his mind, struggling to reduce the horrors he had witnessed to words on tape - an official report for Starfleet which might, if things moved fast, procure a Federation medical team in several weeks' time. By then how many more thousands would have died from lack of the most basic care and supplies?

There was a movement in the doorway. He looked up to see Nurse Chapel standing there. She had been with him on the planet and had conducted herself with her usual calm, professional efficiency, but he wished she hadn't had to be there. His heart went out to her as he noted the tension in her face and the haunted look in her eyes. He should have talked with her sooner - but what was there to say?

She stood in front of his desk. "Lt Bradley's last medication is wearing off," she reported. "He's becoming very restless."

McCoy rose immediately but paused in the doorway to look at her. Her eyes dropped beneath his gaze and he saw that the hold she had over her emotions had become very fragile indeed.

"Stay here, Chris. I'll be back in a minute."

She shook her head. "I'm in the middle of clearing away an old experiment in the lab. I'll come back when I've finished if that's okay."

"That's fine," McCoy agreed, and went to attend to Bradley.

While he was watching the readings stabilise, he was startled by a loud crash coming from the adjoining lab. He raced next door to find his head nurse staring disbelievingly at the floor littered with broken glass and spreading pools of coloured liquids.

McCoy racked his brain frantically for a few seconds, trying to remember whether any of the spilt substances were harmful, either singly or when mixed as they now were, and then moved towards her.

She lifted horrified eyes to him and suddenly dropped down onto one knee and began to gather the nearest shards of glass into a heap, babbling, "I'm so sorry, Doctor, I don't know...the tray just slipped..."

"Christine, don't touch that glass for heaven's sake!"

Glass crunched beneath his boots as he reached her side. He half lifted her to her feet, and blood from a long cut on her palm stained her uniform. He took her to his office and treated and bound the injury. Then he just held her while she cried, softly and uncontrollably. Once, through her sobs, she managed, "I'm sorry...it was the children." McCoy hugged her closer and waited patiently for her to finish.

It was the memory of the children that was haunting him the most, too. He kept pushing their horrifying images to the back of his mind, together with a decision he knew he had to make, both to be dealt with whenever he went off duty. He refused to admit to himself that his unwillingness to face up to that could

possibly have anything to do with still being on duty more than thirty six hours after their return from Belos.

He turned his attention back to Chapel as she began fumbling for a handkerchief. He handed her a tissue and she scrubbed at her tearstained face. "I must look awful."

McCoy smiled. "Well, it might just start rumours that I beat up my nurses. Now I want you to get out of here and take tomorrow off. Try to relax and look after yourself a bit, okay?"

He over-rode her protests and apologies, but she paused on her way out. "Whose shoulder do you cry on, Leonard?"

McCoy grinned and said, "Hell, when you get to my age, you don't need one. G'night, Chris."

The Doctor's cheerful air fell away from him as soon as the door closed. He slumped into his chair and rubbed his eyes. He returned to the thankless task of completing the report, sinking deeper into despair as he relived once again the terrible scenes engraved into his memory.

At some point later he became aware that he was no longer alone. With a great effort he dragged himself out of the nightmares in his mind. He peered blearily over the untidy piles of discarded notes on his desk and scowled at his visitor.

"What do you want?"

"I came to see whether you have finished the report for Starfleet," Spock stated.

"Does it look like it?" demanded McCoy irritably. "I'll send it up to the Bridge when it's ready."

"I sent the initial urgent request for aid as soon as we returned, but they will require your detailed report as soon as possible."

"I know, Spock, I'm working on it," said the Doctor, exasperated.

The Science Officer hesitated. "It is now 11.30 pm. You have been working on it for one point seven days."

"Oh, well done, Spock. You can count and tell the time. I always knew that computer in your head would come in useful one day."

Silent for a moment as he considered the heavy sarcasm, Spock's gaze rested on the heap of computer record-tapes abandoned on the desk. McCoy followed the direction of his gaze and said defensively, "They didn't come out right. I had to do them again."

Spock refrained from asking why he had not simply erased the unwanted material. He had learned that logical questions often produced highly irrational responses from Humans, especially in times of stress. He looked at the ship's doctor, who had evidently not slept since their return from the planet, and thought dispassionately what inadequate defences these Humans had against unpleasant ordeals, and how little time it took for them to look as exhausted and tormented as this one did now.

He tried to be diplomatic. "If there is a difficulty, I would be willing to write the report."

"It would be easy for you, wouldn't it?" flared McCoy. "Well, I may only be a lowly Human, but I can still do my job."

"I did not intend to imply that you could not," Spock said stiffly, and turned towards the door.

McCoy watched him leaving with something close to panic. He hadn't meant to say any of those things... Spock wasn't to blame, and he knew in his heart that the Vulcan hadn't been quite as unaffected by the bloody scenes on Belos as he would have liked people to believe.

Spock's acute hearing caught the whispered apology, and he turned back to face desperation in the blue eyes. "No offence was taken, Doctor. Do you wish to discuss anything?"

McCoy gestured helplessly, and began to fiddle with objects on his desk. He badly needed to talk to someone... but Spock wouldn't want to listen. He wouldn't understand, and if he did manage to start talking and then Spock went all Vulcan and distant on him, he felt he wouldn't be able to stand it. He shook his head. "No, it doesn't matter. Thanks anyway."

Spock studied the Human carefully. He was extremely tense and it was painfully obvious that something was troubling him deeply, so why did he not say so? Should he try to persuade him to talk in an attempt to relieve the visible agitation, or should he obey the unconvincing words and leave? He sighed inwardly and wished, not for the first time, that Humans would say what they meant. He decided to try just once.

Quietly, he said, "You have not forgotten that I was also on Belos?"

McCoy closed his eyes. "I know." After a long pause, he said, "I guess you just deal with it better."

Spock sat down. "Each person must find their own way of bearing the unbearable."

The Doctor looked surprised at the admission, and said bitterly, "Sure. You meditate. Chris bottles it up for a while and then has a good cry. The emergency team we left behind there will be working so hard they won't have time to feel anything much."

"And you, Doctor?"

"Me? Oh, I manage," said McCoy drearily.

Spock took a risk. "You shut yourself away from your friends and work yourself to the point of exhaustion, at the end of which period you generally become intoxicated in your quarters."

McCoy grinned very tiredly. "It's known as drinking oneself into a stupor, Spock."

"Ah, yes. I recall the colloquial expression," returned Spock gravely.

McCoy's gaze rested on the discarded computer tapes and there was defeat in his voice as he asked, "Tell me, what's the point of writing this report? There's nothing I can say to make some desk-bound bureaucrat realise what it's like down there. It will end up at the bottom of a heap of appeals for aid on a desk somewhere, and if anything is ever done about it, it will be too late for thousands of people. Meanwhile we just sit here on our backsides doing nothing..."

"They will send emergency aid as soon as they receive our preliminary report," Spock reminded him. He realised even as he said it that logic was not what McCoy required just then and perceived a change in the atmosphere as the Doctor withdrew into himself.

"You're right, of course," said McCoy briskly. "Well, I can't sit here all night gossiping. I've got to finish this."

This was clearly a dismissal and

Spock did not know what had precipitated it. He rose. "I bid you goodnight, Doctor."

"Goodnight, Spock."

The Vulcan turned in the doorway. "Please do not omit to go to bed tonight. One more night without sleep and your appearance will surely cause a relapse in any unfortunate patient you may attend."

McCoy snorted indignantly as the doors closed after Spock.

As the Science Officer walked to his quarters, he was certain that McCoy had not spoken of what was really troubling him, but he now had a faint idea of what it might be. If his conjecture was accurate, he reflected, he would hear about it soon enough.

The next morning, Spock and Kirk happened to arrive at the rec room at the same time. After selecting their breakfasts they sat down at their usual table and began to discuss the day's routine. Spock noticed that Kirk glanced towards the door each time it opened; his curiosity was satisfied when he remarked very casually, "I wonder if McCoy will be joining us this morning."

Spock was privately sure that he wouldn't. Kirk continued half to himself, "I hope he's all right. I haven't even seen him since we had that argument after you all returned from Belos."

Spock inclined his head quizzically. "Argument?"

"Mmm. Didn't I tell you?" Kirk buttered his toast. "He wanted to stay on the planet. Got very uptight about it."

"Could you define 'uptight'?" Spock asked.

"He seemed to be furious. I pointed out that it was hardly within a Starship CMO'S remit to stay on some god-forsaken planet in the middle of nowhere. We left a large and perfectly competent medical team down there."

Spock took a sip of his herbal tea and did not reply, but another piece of the puzzle had slipped into place for him.

Kirk continued thoughtfully, "I know he must have been upset about the state of things on Belos, but he doesn't usually let things get to him that badly. Have you seen him, Spock? What do you think?"

"I saw him last night." Spock paused to steeple his fingers in front of him and regarded Kirk gravely. "Knowing the good Doctor as we do, would it be so very strange if one day he found he could not walk away from people who need him more than we do?"

Shock registered momentarily in Kirk's eyes and he choked badly on a mouthful of coffee. Spock rendered the appropriate back slapping treatment.

"For heaven's sake don't be so dramatic! Are you trying to give me heart failure?"

"Indeed not, Captain," Spock assured him.

"Well, don't go around dropping photon tubes like that into the conversation. I'm sure you're reading far too much into it. Bones wouldn't want to leave the Enterprise, that's ridiculous. He couldn't possibly." There was a determined set to Kirk's chin that Spock recognised with inner disquiet. Kirk stood abruptly. "Enough of McCoy and his possible problems. You and I have a ship to run."

. . . . . .

When it was almost time for their shift to end, Kirk informed Spock that he was going to Sickbay to check on McCoy, and would report back later. Spock watched him enter the turbolift with illogical unease. He mentally shook himself as he returned his attention to his scanner. Kirk was McCoy's friend and undoubtedly understood him far better than a Vulcan ever could. Certainly Kirk would adjust his approach accordingly when he saw how vulnerable the Doctor seemed at the moment.

In Sickbay, Kirk was intercepted by Chapel, who hurried to greet him.

"Good afternoon, Nurse Chapel," he responded. "What have you done to yourself?" He nodded towards her bandaged hand.

"Oh, it's nothing serious, sir. Can I help you at all?"

"No, thanks, I've come to see Dr McCoy." He took a step to one side to go around her but smoothly, apparently quite innocently, she moved with him and still blocked his way.

"He's actually very busy at the moment, Captain."

"Hmm." Kirk was familiar with Chapel's protecting-her-boss mode. "Is he with a patient?"

"No," she admitted, rather unwillingly.

"Then I'll just see if he can spare me a few minutes."

Chapel gave up and the doors to McCoy's office opened to reveal the Doctor, very dishevelled, lifting his head from his arms resting on the desk. He looked confused and blearily rubbed an eye. "Ah, Jim."

"Ah, Doctor." Kirk smiled at his friend's discomfiture; this wasn't the first time he'd caught McCoy dozing at his desk after a hard mission. "Your head nurse said you were busy. I see she was right."

McCoy frowned and moved to get up. "Christine's out there? I told her to take today off."

"Hold hard, Bones. Just stay there - you look as if you need to. You can get back to hassling Christine presently. First I'd like you to tell me what's wrong."

McCoy said defensively, "Why should anything be wrong?"

Kirk studied McCoy closely. "Oh, just little things. I haven't seen you for two days, you look like you haven't slept or eaten for weeks, and our illustrious First Officer is dropping cryptic hints that you might want to resign."

McCoy shifted uncomfortably. After a long pause he said in a low voice, "Well, now that you mention it, I was comin' to see you later." He concentrated on rolling a stylus between his fingers. "Jim...I don't know how Spock knew because I sure didn't tell him...but he's right."

Kirk sat down very suddenly. "No! You're not leaving."

"Yes, I am, Jim." McCoy spoke quietly. "I've been here long enough."

"What are you talking about? Bones, you can't leave. I thought you were happy here." There was desperation in Kirk's voice.

"I have been happy here," said McCoy gently. "But I never intended to stay here forever, and it's time for me to move on."

"Move on to where?"

McCoy squared his shoulders. "I'm going to join one of the Red Cross Mobile Emergency Units. They're always very short of volunteers."

"Well, of course they are - they all end up getting killed! Bones, they go to planets in the middle of wars and plagues and famines..."

"Precisely," said McCoy quietly.

"Bones, you can't. What would I... We need you here on the Enterprise." Kirk's hands clenched together in his lap.

"No, you don't. That's the whole point. I am not needed here. Don't you see, Jim?" Blue eyes begged silently for understanding. "You and Spock belong here. You always have and always will."

"I thought you 'belonged' here too."

"But I don't," McCoy said desperately. "I belong wherever I can help people the most. If I joined that Unit I could save more lives in a day than I do here in a year. I could..."

"Bones, you're not thinking straight. You're very tired and upset - you'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

"Don't patronise me!" McCoy's fist slammed onto the desk "You're not listening. Do you want to know just what my job consists of, Captain, sir? What ten years of training and a lifetime of medical experience have led to? Half my time is spent sitting in here on my backside, filling in endless reports and forms. Some days it's a really big event if someone comes in with a headache or a strained muscle. I can do more than this with my time."

"I can't believe you really want to leave the Enterprise."

"The fact that you don't believe it doesn't surprise me in the least," said McCoy with some bitterness. "Nevertheless, it happens to be true."

"It isn't really this bad, is it? Why haven't you said anything before?"

"You never asked," McCoy answered with great weariness. "Jim, you didn't see what it was like on Belos. If you had, you'd understand... Everything here is so unimportant compared to what they're going through."

"Everything?" Kirk felt very cold. He reached across the desk towards McCoy. "Bones, surely we can..."

The Doctor flinched away from Kirk's touch. "Don't. You're not going to change my mind."

Kirk sat rigidly for a moment. There was so much he wanted to say but he couldn't form the words, and the blue-clad figure in front of him didn't look in any condition to discuss the issue further. McCoy wrapped his arms across his stomach as if it hurt. "Do me a favour and get out of here. Please."

Kirk stood up slowly and took a last, disbelieving look at the grey-faced Doctor before leaving the office. Walking through Sickbay, he was unaware of the anxious glances Chapel was directing at him. He stopped at an intercom in the deserted corridor.

"Kirk to Bridge."

"Spock here."

"Spock." Kirk rested his forehead for a moment against the smooth bulkhead. "I think McCoy could probably use a friendly face in a few minutes."

"Are you not on your way to see him?" Kirk detected faint surprise in his voice.

"I have seen him." Kirk swallowed painfully. "I couldn't help. Perhaps you might...?"

"Understood, Captain. I shall proceed immediately and report to you later."

McCoy hunched forward in his chair, exhausted beyond imagining, waiting for the storm of violent shaking to pass. Visions of the starving children of Belos rose again before his eyes and the heart-wrenching sights crowded his mind. Huge piles of rotting corpses; yet the dead were to be pitied less than the survivors of this terrible chemical warfare. People of all ages stumbled around in severe shock, many blinded or bearing raw, open burns on their skin, searching for missing loved ones. Fires raged through towns, destroying the few areas which had remained free of the choking gas clouds, killing those who had been moved there for safety and were too badly injured to escape. Lost children clutched at him as he passed, pleading with him to find their parents or siblings, begging him for food, for safety. He heard again the pitiful pleas of dying mothers to save their babies.

And he had left them.

He just made it to the bathroom adjoining his office before he was as sick as it is possible to be on an empty stomach. He dropped back onto the couch as the world began to swim blackly around him. He leaned forward, trying to stop shaking, and felt guilty for being alive.

The door to his office opened. He started to lift his head but reality lurched warningly again.

"Dropped something," he mumbled in explanation.

Someone sat on the couch beside him and fingers rested lightly on his pulse. McCoy forced his gaze a little past the lean hand and found two rows of gold braid on a blue sleeve.

"Go away, Spock. I'm all right." He couldn't even summon the strength to feel embarrassed at being discovered in this condition.

He heard a scanner whirr, and Spock asked, "Are you in any pain?"

"No, I'm not, don't fuss," replied McCoy faintly. "I'm perfectly all right."

"You are patently not all right, Doctor. Your readings..."

"Not here, Spock. I'm still on duty."

The Vulcan studied the trembling figure and identified the need for dignity and privacy. He nodded. "Very well. I recommend that you go off duty now. I shall escort you to your quarters."

Spock's assistance was required to get him there, in spite of McCoy's protestations that it was not, and was given dispassionately. At their destination, McCoy dropped wearily onto his bunk and waved Spock towards the chair.

"Siddown, Spock... that is, if you haven't got to go..."

"Thank you." Spock sat back, regarding the Doctor thoughtfully. "I came to tell you that the first medical ship is on its way to Belos."

"Well, that's something, I suppose."

Spock asked quietly, "Can I help, Doctor?"

McCoy rubbed his face. "What made you think I wanted to leave?"

"The distress you experience when you have to leave sick people in danger appears to have become increasingly severe and prolonged on recent occasions. It has been my private speculation that one day you would find yourself unable to turn your back on people who so urgently need medical expertise."

"That's not too far off the mark." McCoy stared at the floor. "For a speculation."

"May I ask what you wish to do instead?"

"Join one of the Red Cross Mobile Emergency Units."

Spock raised an eyebrow at the defiance in his tone. "I see."

McCoy tried to see past the Vulcan mask. "What do you think?"

"That is of no relevance."

"No - but I'd appreciate your opinion."

"As you wish. I think you would be no happier with the Red Cross. There will always be people you cannot save. You would still be frustrated by obstacles placed in the way of your healing - the very situations you would be sent into would ensure that. Also, you are accustomed to working with state of the art equipment and drugs, which would not be available to you in the Red Cross. That, I think, would cause you more frustration than you might realise."

McCoy nodded. "Thanks for your honesty - and for not biting my head off about it."

Spock looked offended. "I fail to see what grounds you have for expecting me to perform such an improbable act."

McCoy gave a faint grin, then said wryly, "I'll deny this if you ever repeat it back to me but... you Vulcans just might have something in this non-emotion idea. It wasn't quite as... easy telling Jim."

"You imply that the Captain was not entirely in favour of the idea."

"You could say that. I think he took it at a personal insult that someone doesn't want to stay on his precious ship."

Inwardly, Spock flinched at the hurt in McCoy's voice. Gently, he pointed out, "The news must have come as something of a shock to him, and he may be worried by your alternative choice of career. Working for the Red Cross is a notoriously dangerous occupation. Also, he has become accustomed to your companionship and support - losing that would be a disappointment to him."

"He didn't act like those might have been his reasons," McCoy objected.

Spock arched an eyebrow. "Really, Doctor, you of all people should admit that you Humans rarely say what you mean about issues important to you. I have found you to be particularly expert at this form of mild deception."

McCoy looked sheepish. "You may have a point." Then anger crossed his face like a shadow. "But he'd better not try to stop me going."

"I think that would be most unlikely," Spock declared. "He told me once of an old Earth proverb which says,

'If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it is yours. If it does not, it never was.' I do not believe the Captain would attempt to keep you here against your will."

McCoy looked stunned and turned his head away. Spock rose to leave.

"If you give me your word that you will eat a nourishing meal, I will not be forced to stay and supervise the momentous event. Equally I am sure your system would benefit from sleep."

"Yes, Doctor Spock," McCoy responded with a tired smile. "Anything else?"

Spock turned back from the door. "Affirmative. If you wish to discuss anything further, at any time, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Spock. For understanding."

An eyebrow rose in mock alarm. "I have never claimed to 'understand' any member of the Human species, Doctor - least of all you. However if I have been of any assistance, I am gratified. Goodnight."

The doors closed after him and McCoy could not help but reflect ironically on the difference in his feelings after each of the encounters with his two closest friends. He could never have predicted the outcome.

Spock entered the Captain's quarters to find him staring into space across the chess table. The Vulcan seated himself and waited, trying to assess his mood. After a lengthy silence, he ventured, "You appear troubled, Jim."

Kirk looked at him and said frankly, "I feel like I've been hit in the face with a brick."

Spock studied him quizzically. "I am pleased to report you do not look as if you have suffered such an attack. What has precipitated this sensory illusion?"

"If you've seen McCoy, you know. He looks terrible. How did you know he wanted to leave?"

"Merely my observation of him in recent months."

"But why?" Kirk cried, frustrated. "Why does he want to go?"

"Did he not give you his reasons?"

Colour flooded Kirk's face. "Maybe I didn't give him the chance."

Spock folded his hands together. "He feels that his skill and training, which you must admit are quite exceptional, could be put to better use. He wants to help the people who need him but to whom, in the course of this career, he is unable to give his undivided time and attention. Knowing how suffering in others distresses the Doctor, it is not entirely unexpected."

"Well, it's unexpected to me," said Kirk painfully. "I need him, Spock."

"Did you tell him so?"

Kirk did not answer. Spock tried to explain. "Jim, for you and me, a Starship is the best possible place for us to be. You, I believe, were born for it, we were both trained for it. It is the only place where we can fulfil our hopes and ambitions - our destinies. It is not like that for everyone - it is not for McCoy. How many war-torn planets and plague-ridden colonies has the Doctor been

forced to leave before he could help, knowing that he was needed there? It is against his nature. It has cost him a great deal - perhaps more each time it happens. He sees this as the answer to his dilemma - and I believe we should honour his decision."

Kirk glanced sharply at Spock as he thought he detected the tone of an order in that last statement, but decided he had imagined it.

"That's all very perceptive of you, Mr Spock. I suppose you're right, but I don't like it." He frowned. "But even if I do approve his resignation, it will take months for all the paperwork to go through. Once he realises that, maybe he'll change his mind."

"There is a way around the red tape," Spock pointed out. "It would not be the first time you had used your influence for the good of a crewmember - or a friend."

"If you're talking about getting you to Vulcan, this is entirely different."

"Is it? It is a friend in trouble."

"It isn't a matter of life and death for him," protested Kirk.

"That is precisely what it is, Jim. It's other people's lives and deaths."

Kirk's shoulders sagged. "You saw this coming and I didn't," he acknowledged. "And you're not even supposed to understand about these things." His expression became abstracted as he considered recent occasions when McCoy seemed to have dropped from sight for days at a time - and now he realised they usually occurred right after science/medical orientated visits to trouble-stricken planets. He recalled times when McCoy had been subdued and dispirited, and he had never quite had enough time to ask him if he was all right. Only twice recently had McCoy called by his quarters in off duty hours, looking tired and drawn, suggesting a drink. The first time Kirk had simply been too busy to see him; the second time - his cheeks burned with remorse as he remembered - they had ended up talking over some command problem that Kirk had been worried about. Now he realised too late that those visits might have been pleas for help - that the councillor needed to be counselled for once - and he had ignored them.

Spock had been watching the play of emotions across his friend's expressive face. Kirk sounded ashamed as he said, "McCoy never asks for help. How could I have been so selfish? He's always there when I need him - always."

"And when I do," added Spock quietly.

"Do you think it's too late to change his mind?" Kirk asked, without much hope.

Spock nodded. "Regrettably, yes. The time when our advice might have been required is past."

"You're probably right." Kirk stirred. "I'll see him first thing tomorrow morning. I can at least apologise for my behaviour."

Next morning, McCoy glanced up from his paperwork. "Come in." The door opened to admit Kirk and the Doctor edged back involuntarily in his seat.

Kirk moved swiftly forward. "Bones, don't look like that! I came to tell you I'm really sorry for the way I acted

yesterday. I didn't even give you a chance to explain."

McCoy relaxed slightly. "Sit down, Jim."

Kirk obeyed and continued, "I had no right. I should have realised what you've been going through, and that you wouldn't make that kind of decision lightly. I really do feel you're needed here - by the whole crew, not just me - but if it's what you truly want, I'll do everything I can to push it through for you."

"Everything a Starship Captain can do is quite a lot," McCoy said slowly, not quite certain what he was being offered.

Kirk nodded. "Yes."

"In that case, thanks. I'd appreciate it."

"Is there anything you want to talk about? If I can help by listening...?"

"No, thank you, Captain. My mind is quite made up." The hard edge to his voice screamed 'too late' to Kirk's guilty conscience. "I'll go through everything with M'Benga and Chapel before I leave."

Kirk nodded and got up. "I'll see to everything." There didn't seem to be anything else to say. He couldn't believe this was happening - he kept expecting McCoy to say he'd changed his mind, it had been a joke, that he'd just been a bit fed up but was all right now... He lingered on his way to the door to increase the chance of it happening, but it didn't. He wasn't called back. "I'll miss you like hell, Bones," Kirk said over his shoulder, and left hurriedly.

The next two weeks flew by in a flurry of hectic activity. McCoy never seemed to have a moment to himself to reflect on the speed and turn of events which had been taken out of his hands. Duty hours were spent instructing M'Benga and Chapel in his especial responsibilities, and clearing up as much of the outstanding paperwork as he could manage. Off-duty hours were filled with an almost continuous stream of crewmembers dropping by his quarters to wish him well.

The eve of his departure arrived unbelievably quickly. Kirk had arranged a farewell dinner party for him with the senior officers. It was a bitter-sweet evening, full of shared reminiscences of past missions, gentle teasing and laughter.

Eventually Kirk rose to propose the final toast. "To Dr Leonard McCoy, the best friend anyone could have, and the finest Doctor in Starfleet. Our love goes with you, Bones, and we wish you success and happiness."

"Success and happiness," echoed around the table, and the lump in McCoy's throat prevented him from replying; he could only raise his own glass in response.

The party broke up then. McCoy, near to tears, protested that he had to beam down to Starbase Six at some unearthly hour in the morning, and he hadn't finished packing yet. Chapel and Uhura kissed him, and Scott gave him a bear hug. Sulu, Chekov and M'Benga all shook hands. Only Kirk and Spock lingered.

Kirk told Spock, "I'll just take a look around the ship before I turn in."

"And I shall check on Engineering presently. Mr Scott mentioned a curious anomaly on one of the instrument

panels."

Kirk nodded and touched McCoy's arm. "Goodnight, Bones. I'll see you off in the morning."

"Sure. Thanks for the party, Jim. It was great."

Kirk left and McCoy looked doubtfully at the unwieldy pile of presents on the table.

"May I assist you to transfer the gifts to your quarters?" Spock offered.

"Thanks, I'd be grateful. Everyone has been so kind."

Between them they gathered up the gifts (Spock took the books and McCoy the bottles) and proceeded to the Doctor's quarters where packed cases were stacked neatly against one wall.

McCoy looked around the uncharacteristically bare room and sighed. "It's all happened so fast, Spock. I can hardly believe it's happening."

"You will be missed, Doctor." Spock withdrew a small package from a concealed pocket in the ceremonial robe he wore and offered it somewhat awkwardly to McCoy. "I should be honoured if you would accept a small token of remembrance from me."

Dumb with surprise, the Doctor opened the box. Gleaming against the dark velvet was an IDIC symbol. A deep red firecrystal glowed at the apex of a triangle of satiny-smooth gold, and the circle it bisected was midnight-blue, rough-grained metal. The physician's fingers ran lightly over the symbol, appreciating the different textures used in its creation. He looked helplessly at Spock, completely overwhelmed.

"It was given to me a long time ago," Spock said. "I would like you to have it. I believe that, in spite of your often strenuous attempts to indicate otherwise, you respect the principles of IDIC as highly as we do."

McCoy found his voice at last. "Thank you, Spock. It's beautiful. Please believe I will treasure it." He added a little awkwardly, "I guess I'm gonna miss you. Who am I goin' to argue with?"

"I am certain you will find someone, Doctor," Spock replied with enough feeling in his voice to make McCoy grin.

"You'll take care of Jim, won't you?"

Spock nodded. "Always." He lifted his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Dr McCoy."

McCoy's hand rose in a perfect mirror-image. "Live long and prosper, Spock. And peace, above all."

Spock nodded gravely. "Good luck." He turned and left.

There were only four hours to go until McCoy's departure and he knew there was no point in trying to sleep. After finishing his packing he decided to take a last wander around the ship to say a private goodbye to his special places. He was prowling around the dimly lit Sickbay when, without warning, the ship reverberated violently. He picked himself up off the floor and slammed a fist onto the nearest intercom switch.

"McCoy to Bridge. What the hell was that?"

There was a confusion of background noises before the voice of the Lieutenant on the night shift came

through clearly. "Doctor, there has been an explosion in the engineering section. We have reports of casualties."

"I'm on my way. McCoy out."

His staff were already making preparations to receive the injured. He grabbed an emergency kit and was out of the door at a run, closely followed by a nurse and the duty doctor.

He found Engineering in chaos. The fire crew were fighting amid clouds of choking, acrid smoke to extinguish the blazing bank of consoles. Twisted sections of metal sheeting and lumps of sizzling wiring had been hurled across the room. Scott arrived at a run and immediately took charge of the damage control parties.

McCoy's initial appraising glance revealed several conscious casualties, each already being attended by colleagues whose knowledge of first aid McCoy knew to be comprehensive - (hadn't he trained them?). His attention was drawn to the far corner where an obviously very shocked young ensign was kneeling beside a figure on the floor. He hurried over and felt an icy knot form in his stomach when he realised that the unconscious casualty was Spock. The young ensign babbled an explanation as he grimly assessed the Vulcan's condition.

"Mr Spock was helping us locate the cause of the power fluctuations and there was an explosion and he pushed me out of the way and caught the force of it and now he's dead..."

She was led away by a nurse and McCoy straightened to beckon the anti-grav stretcher bearers over, his mind already planning the surgery ahead. A shard of twisted metal was embedded in Spock's abdomen, causing extensive internal injuries and profuse bleeding; one arm was severely burnt where he had instinctively thrown it up to shield his face. There was also a head injury.

Suddenly Kirk was there, horror etched on his face as he took in the state of his friend. "Bones!"

McCoy rapidly administered a hypo to stabilise his patient, then waved the medics to rush him to Sickbay. He took a second to grasp Kirk's hand, not noticing that his own was streaked with Spock's blood.

"He's still alive, Jim. I'll do everything I can. See if you can help here."

Kirk nodded numbly, took a deep breath, and tried to hide his fear as he turned to help his crew.

It took the surgeon nearly an hour to extricate the jagged segment of metal, and considerably longer to repair the damage it had caused. At the same time M'Benga removed the other metal fragments and worked on healing the burned arm. He finished first and stood back to watch McCoy checking his own work with meticulous care before closing the wound.

The intercom buzzed. An impersonal voice said, "Message to Dr McCoy from Captain Kirk. We will be within transporter range of Starbase Six in fifteen minutes for a duration of exactly thirteen minutes. Bridge out."

McCoy's lips tightened. M'Benga moved forward understandingly. "I'll finish, Leonard. You'd better be going."

McCoy continued his work, apparently without a break in his concentration. Images were racing through his mind, random memories surfacing as he struggled with the painful

decision. The horrors recently witnessed on Belos mingled with epidemics and emergencies he had handled on the Enterprise. An unknown number of unknown lives had to be weighed against the four hundred and thirty entrusted to his care. He particularly considered two very special lives; this one beneath his hands now, and the other one, doubtless waiting in the office with his usual unwavering faith in McCoy's abilities. The two with whom he was the third, integral member of a unique team, unrivalled in the whole of Starfleet, and which only worked at optimum efficiency when all three were present. His decision affected not only himself, but Kirk and Spock as well, more than he had realised.

Had he the right to disrupt the delicate balance formed by the blending of their talents and personalities? Could he bear to be away from them, maybe to hear one day that one had been critically injured or had died, and have to know that he had deliberately chosen not to be with them - to wonder if he might have been able to save the one who had died, or comfort the one who lived? Could he walk away from this unique person, more precious to him than he would ever admit, whom he had battled once again through the night to save, without knowing whether he would live or die? Could he leave Kirk to face the very real possibility of Spock's death from these injuries, and head off into the sunrise, all because he had some half-baked notion of being a hero? Spock's words echoed in his mind. *There will always be lives you cannot save.*

M'Benga and the nurse exchanged puzzled glances at the prolonged silence. The African doctor cleared his throat and tried again. "Dr McCoy, I'll take over now if you want to leave."

"Hmm?" McCoy raised his eyebrows (he never had been able to do it one at a time, like Spock, darn it). "Leave? I'm not goin' anywhere."

As soon as McCoy had cleaned up after surgery, he went to his office where he knew he would find Kirk waiting for him. The Captain moved eagerly towards him, the question burning in his eyes.

McCoy raised a warning hand. "It's too soon to say, Jim. He has extensive internal injuries as well as burns and concussion. He came through the operation quite well but he's too weak at the moment to initiate a healing trance."

Kirk nodded tightly. "I see. Thank you for stopping to tell me." He looked at the chronometer on the desk. "You should be going now. There are only four minutes until we're out of range."

"No need," the Doctor said quietly. "I'm not going, Jim."

Kirk stared at him, hope dawning in his eyes. "You mustn't let this stop you if you truly want to go."

McCoy sank into his chair and stretched his legs out in front of himself. "I'm sorry to have messed you around, Jim. I thought it was what I really wanted to do but... I guess you and Spock are more important to me than I was tryin' to kid myself. As long as you two are galloping around the cosmos, you've gotta have someone to patch you up each time you get into trouble."

Kirk's whole body relaxed and a broad grin eased the strain in his face as he enveloped the Doctor in a hug. "Thanks for staying, Bones." Then he looked away. "I couldn't bear to lose both of you."

McCoy gripped his arm. "Hey, with

luck from pitchforks and pointed ears you're not gonna lose either of us. C'mon, let's see how he's doing."

In the side ward Kirk sat beside the bed, gaze fixed on the bandaged occupant, while McCoy critically examined the readings. He nodded, satisfied. "That's fine. He's in a healing trance. He's going to be all right."

Kirk's hand resting on the bed tightened convulsively on the blanket. McCoy briefly laid a hand on his shoulder as he passed and left the Captain alone with his friend.

Later McCoy went back to shoo Kirk away for some breakfast. On his way obediently out of the door, Kirk paused to regard the Doctor curiously. "Bones, if Spock hadn't been injured, would you...?"

"Now, you go and run the ship like a good Captain and leave me to see to my patient," returned McCoy good-naturedly, blue eyes twinkling.

Late that evening, McCoy called Kirk to warn him it looked as though Spock's trance would break soon. As he arrived, McCoy was expertly delivering a couple of hard slaps to the uninjured side of Spock's face to bring him to consciousness. His eyes opened and focused on McCoy and Kirk beside him.

"How are you feeling, Spock?" the Doctor asked quietly.

An eyebrow lifted and disappeared into the bandage. "Somewhat curious, I confess," he admitted. "Either my time sense has been seriously impaired, or you should have left by now."

McCoy grinned sheepishly. "Changed my mind, Spock. Privilege of the living, as they say."

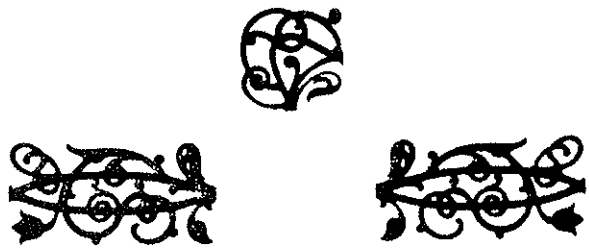
"That is not... entirely unwelcome news, Doctor."

"Why, thank you, Mr Spock. I thought if you wanted me to stay so much that you were willing to get blown up in Engineering, it was the least I could do. Besides, where else could I hit a Vulcan and not get hit back?"

"Good news, Spock, don't you think?" asked Kirk, buoyantly.

"It would have been very peaceful." Spock eyed the Doctor diffidently. "However, I believe you have an expression - how does it go? - better the devil you know..."

Kirk grinned widely and McCoy snorted and Spock looked innocent, and McCoy knew he was where he belonged.



THE LAST CHANCE

by

Simonetta Mostarda

"..... and remember, you'll be completely alone. You'll have only your own capacities and abilities to rely on. That is why you are taking this test."

Captain Kirk stood in the middle of the hangar deck. He was flanked by two rows of cadets at attention.

"Your trainer, Commander Spock," he continued, gesturing to Spock who stood at his right side, "will be with you. If you need to, speak to him - but remember that your score depends on how you cope by yourself. Needless to say that the Federation is counting on you and that we know you will do your best. Any questions?"

Nobody spoke.

"Well, all that remains to be said is, Good Luck and may the best man win."

"Dismissed!" Spock ordered.

Kirk stood for a moment looking after the cadets. He took a deep breath. He could remember very clearly a day, many years ago, when a young Lieutenant named James Tiberius Kirk had waited to take this same test. He could almost feel the excitement he had felt then.

"I am ... almost ... envious of those people. They have their whole life to live. New worlds, new stars to discover, to explore, to enjoy.... That's life, Spock," he whispered to the Vulcan who was still standing at his side with his hands clasped behind his back.

"I see your point, Captain. However, you had your turn. Your career has been unique, but as Doctor McCoy would say, 'your horse has already run the race.' There are many other important things for you to do now. I think you will enjoy them just as much," Spock said.

"Do you mean... enjoy each day as it comes?" Kirk asked, peering at him.

"Correct, Captain, even though roughly expressed," Spock replied levelly.

Kirk laughed. Although they'd been playing the same game for years they still enjoyed it.

"Good! Let's enjoy our time then!" he exclaimed. He continued, "To recapitulate, Spock. The responsibility for the choice of planet for the test is yours. You are not to reveal which planet except in an emergency, of course. That's all."

And that really was all as he didn't want to stay there any longer looking at those young people. Yes indeed, he was envious of them! *Shame on you, Jim!* he thought to himself.

He paced to the small lift and entered it. It began moving immediately.

"I'll be waiting for you in my quarters in ... 72 hours," Kirk finished after looking at his watch.

"72.10 hours," Spock corrected.

Kirk sighed. He repeated 72.10

hours. *There are just a few things you can always rely on in your life, thank god, and Spock is one of mine. Time passes but Spock always remains the same. No, not the same. Like wine he improves as time goes by,* Kirk thought smiling warmly.

A moment later he vanished from sight. A faint half-smile touched Spock's mouth as he watched him go.

"Ready to leave, Commander!" said Ensign Richard from behind him.

Spock turned to face him. The Ensign, who was the shuttle's designated pilot, continued,

"Whenever you want. Just give the word...." Richard snapped his fingers, smiling at the Vulcan.

"Very well. Stand by, Ensign. We will leave in ten minutes," said Spock raising his eyebrows at the snap of fingers.

Ten minutes later the shuttle Copernicus left the Enterprise. She moved a safe distance away from the mother ship then waited, hanging motionless in space as the larger ship moved away.

Spock waited until the Enterprise was out of visual range then turned to face the cadets. He had already made his decision as to their destination. They were going to the fifth planet out from Oshitar.

He had previously considered all the possible scenarios. The Oshitar system was composed of twelve planets orbiting a blue giant star. The innermost three planets were too hot for life whereas the seventh to twelfth were frozen wastes due to their distance from the sun.

The only planets where they could land without serious risk to the cadets were therefore four, five and six. He had chosen Oshitar 5 as it was the only one that had three climatic zones. This variation in climate would give him the greatest possible variations for the forthcoming test.

The Vulcan rose to stand in front of the cockpit, his hands clasped behind his back as usual. He was about to speak when the shuttle swerved violently, throwing everyone else out of their seats and knocking Spock's head against the navigation console. The lights dimmed while an alarm started howling.

"Richard, what is happening?" Spock asked as he tried to get up.

"I ... I don't know, sir," replied the scared young Ensign. He was trying to regain control of the craft.

Spock got up, ignoring the pain in his head and the accompanying slight vertigo. For a few seconds he too tried to regain control of the shuttle. Realising there was nothing he could do he attempted to launch an SOS although he knew the Enterprise was too far away to pick the call up.

"Enterprise! Copernicus here! Come in! We need help! Can you read us, Enterprise?"

The shuttle started rolling, then dropped suddenly. The cadets yelled. Spock didn't react; Vulcans never show their emotions.

Spock regained consciousness in darkness. The crash landing had been terrible. The shuttle had rolled over and over on impact until finally it had come to

rest against a huge boulder. Everybody on board had been thrown around with the small craft's motion. Spock remembered seeing Ensign Martin, a young and attractive woman, breaking one of the portholes with her head. He could still hear her desperate cry of pain and terror as she was pulled through it.He concentrated on keeping his emotions under control, grateful that he was capable of doing so.

"Richard!" he called.

He could hardly breathe. Every breath he took caused him pain. He must have fractured some ribs in the crash. There was also something heavy lying on him that was contributing to his difficulty in breathing.

"Richard!" he repeated.

He tried to get up when Richard didn't reply. It was then that he realised that it was Richard's body that was preventing him from breathing freely.

"Sir... "

"Roberts? Roberts, where are you?" Spock replied to the faint call.

"Over here, sir .... please, help me," replied the young woman.

"Continue calling, Ensign." Spock said to her.

He freed himself from Richard's body then began moving towards the voice. Two or three times he felt something soft under him and knew that it was the body of another of the cadets. It was terrible; the smell of blood was strong and he had to fight not to retch. Finally he reached the young Ensign.

"Relax, Roberts," Spock said as he touched her hand. "Can you move?" he continued. The darkness was almost total.

"My leg, sir. I think it's caught in something. I tried to move but had to stop as it seems to be caught on something sharp. It hurts, sir," she replied.

"Do not worry, Ensign. I will set you free." Spock tried to reassure while he attempted to find out what was trapping her.

"Sir ... the others ... are they all dead? Are they?" she asked.

When Spock didn't reply she continued, "All dead, then."

"Why do you say that? I have not answered your question," Spock asked.

"Exactly..." she replied.

'Quite logical, Spock thought, but said nothing.

"We must wait until tomorrow. When daylight returns we will be able to see if anyone else has survived," he said while he tried the sharp edge of the seat that was holding the young woman. He gripped it securely and lifted it away. Roberts moaned softly.

"I am sorry, Ensign. It was the only way to free your leg," Spock apologised.

"Don't apologise, sir. You did the right thing as usual," she said rubbing her injured leg.

"We must get out of here and find a refuge for the rest of the night. It is very cold," said Spock, who was feeling more and more uneasy as time went by.

They moved to the door. It was blocked.

"Stay back," Spock said to Roberts. Then he forced the door open.

It was snowing. Spock shivered as a gust of chilly wind hit him. He took his tricorder out and switched it on. Fortunately it still worked.

"Over there," he shouted after scanning round. "The tricorder shows a large cave in a massive mountain range," he explained to Roberts hoping they could find a good shelter out of the wind there. A strong gust of wind made him shiver again.

"Can you walk?" he asked Roberts, thinking it was best to move before they froze.

Tentatively Roberts tried to move. "Yes, sir. I think I can," she said finally standing on her sound leg.

"Let us move then," said Spock. He slipped a cold arm around her waist to help support her efforts.

"Is the cave a long way from here, sir?" she asked, biting her lower lip to stop herself from crying out in pain as she walked. Spock, who had noticed it, tried unobtrusively to increase his support. However he made no comment as he respected her will. *Humans...* he thought while it continued to snow.

It took them a long time to reach the massive mountains as they had to stop frequently in order to rest. Even when they reached the mountains it took more time to find the cave. Finally Spock saw it and led Roberts to it.

Spock scanned for life signs and on finding none the two Starfleet officers entered. The cave was large with just the one entrance, ideal for defence.

Spock was satisfied for the moment. He switched his tricorder off and helped Ensign Roberts to sit down. The young woman moaned softly.

Spock fired his phaser against the rocks to provide a source of heat. He stood for a moment feeling warmth flow back into his body, then he went back to Roberts.

The Vulcan examined her leg. It was swollen and purplish with a large, deep cut a few centimetres below the knee. It was bleeding heavily and the ground beneath her was turning red.

Spock knew he must stop the bleeding or the young Ensign would soon collapse and die. He took his uniform jacket off and then tore a long strip from his shirt. This he placed around Roberts' leg just above the knee and tied it tightly. Roberts grimaced in pain.

"I am sorry, Roberts. We must stop the bleeding," Spock said gently. He continued, "Listen to me. I must return to the shuttle for the medical kit. I will return in forty minutes. You must remember to release the tourniquet every fifteen minutes. Do you understand?"

Roberts nodded in reply. Without another word Spock stood up and moved to the exit.

"Sir...?" Roberts' voice stopped him halfway there. He turned back.

"Please hurry, sir," she said. The tinge of desperation in her voice made Spock give her a 'Don't worry, I'll be back soon' look. Then he left.

While he walked through the darkness trying to ignore the cold, Spock thought. He knew that he and Roberts could survive one night in these conditions but not two. The Enterprise would not return for seventy point

twenty-two hours. The only logical method of survival was for them to find their way into the large underground structure that his tricorder had shown him while he had been searching for the cave. Of course he had not mentioned it to Roberts. He had not wanted to give her false hopes.

There was one other thing that he could not explain, the faint cry of pain he had heard while he had been heating the cave wall. It could have been the moaning of the wind but he was not convinced. However he would think about that later. One thing at a time. He stopped as the shape of the shuttle loomed out of the darkness.

Roberts was finally asleep. Spock slipped out of his thermal sleeping bag. He had been waiting for hours, motionless in the darkness, until he was sure she was asleep.

It hadn't been easy for the young Ensign. The Vulcan had tended to the cut on her leg and stopped the bleeding. It must have been painful but Roberts had borne it without groaning. Spock admired her.

The Vulcan set his tricorder next to her. He had recorded a message for her, to explain where he was going and why he had said nothing to her about the underground structure and the power source he had detected. He set the display to activate in four hours. And, he thought, if he was not back within four hours then there would be no need to continue hiding the truth from Roberts.

Spock went outside. It was very cold. It was still snowing and the strong, cold wind was making the snow swirl here and there as if it was a poor crazy thing. The Vulcan shivered. He needed to head 30 degrees south west.

Spock walked quickly for a long while through the snow, and just as he started thinking he would die, frozen out here, he reached a large rock. His small exploration tricorder showed that the power source he was searching for was in there.

How was he to get in there? There was no sign of an entrance or any devices to open a door. So, how could he enter? How....?

Spock began to feel desperate. It was very, very cold. He could barely feel the blood flowing through his feet. He could scarcely even think. He just wished to be there...

... he found himself in a large room, filled with computers and strange unknown devices.

Spock started. He could not believe it, and yet, it had happened. However illogical, it had happened. Suddenly he was sure that there was something more powerful... something he could not even imagine. He did not know why he was so sure, but it was there ... somewhere on the planet.

'Just a hunch' as Jim Kirk would have said. *A hunch...* Spock thought, a Human trait of his personality. He knew perfectly well that he was able to feel Human emotions, but he never really counted on them. Hunches, desperation ... but he was desperate now and knew he must use his Human half.

So, however illogical it might seem, he wished to meet that 'something powerful.' 'Please ...' he added mentally.

Suddenly he was floating weightlessly in a dark space. The darkness was complete but he could feel a

spark of consciousness he couldn't go through. So he wasn't surprised when a voice spoke.

"Who are you?" it asked.

"I am Spock of Vulcan," he replied simply.

"It is a long time since I saw any biped beings," the voice continued.

"How long have you been here?" Spock asked.

"How long...? I do not know. I have always been here... since the beginning," the voice replied. Spock could hear the loneliness in it. He had the impression it was scanning his mind.

"I need help..." the Vulcan began.

"Welcome back, biped being!" the voice said and its voice was joyful.

Spock knew it wasn't listening to him. Or should it be would not listen to him.

"I need help," the Vulcan repeated.

"I know what you need. Don't worry. I have your place ready for you."

Spock wished he was back in the cave along with Roberts but it didn't work this time. He tried to withdraw but it was too late. He was still floating weightless in the darkness. Then Spock started moving as though being drawn by an invisible force.

The darkness began to fade and soon the Vulcan found himself over a boundless plain where many different scenes were enacted before his eyes. He saw battles; flew over vessels and starships, unknown seas and mountains, living beings he had never seen before, animals and humanoid beings and their evolution.

'Fascinating,' Spock thought, 'the whole history of this planet is reproduced here. What kind of powerful mind can do this?'

Suddenly the force brought him to a halt and he knew he was trapped. He was on Vulcan facing Mount Seleya. He could feel the warmth.

"This is your place. Isn't it?" asked the joyful voice.

Spock knew it had been scanning his mind and reproducing his world. Probably he had been wishing to be back at home. He closed his eyes and wished, as he had never done before, to be back on board the Enterprise but he knew it was too late.

"Welcome home, my friend!" the voice said happily.

Doctor McCoy almost bumped into Captain Kirk as the latter hurried out of his quarters.

"Jim, Spock isn't... " the Doctor started to say.

"I already know, Bones!" Kirk interrupted him. He was running for the turbo-lift.

McCoy said nothing further, just followed Kirk into the turbo-lift. Kirk was very worried about Spock. It was totally unlike Spock not to arrive at the appointed place at the appointed time. Something terrible must have happened... Fortunately the turbo-lift stopped, interrupting his thoughts. The doors slid open and Kirk hurried onto the Bridge.

"We have been using the long range scanners, sir." Sulu vacated the command chair hurriedly. "There's no sign of the shuttle. What can have happened?"

"I don't know, Sulu," Kirk muttered. He continued in a louder voice. "Mister Chekov, put the Oshitar system on screen."

A moment later the schematic appeared and Chekov began to describe it.

"Chekov, if you were in Spock's place which of those planets would you have chosen?" Kirk asked.

"The fifth one, sir. For two reasons. Firstly because it is neither ice bound nor exceptionally hot. Secondly it has three climatic zones thus allowing for three different tests," replied Chekov firmly.

"That seems logical. Spock would surely have chosen it. Chekov, scan that planet. Search for..."

"I've done that already, sir. I couldn't find any sign of the shuttle down there." Chekov interrupted him, his voice apologetic.

"You were quite right, Chekov. Thank you, Pavel. We are all worried about Mister Spock," Kirk said, giving Chekov a warm smile.

However the problem was still there. Kirk crossed to where McCoy was standing watching the screen.

"How do we find him, Jim? He could be wounded or in danger or ..." McCoy stopped himself before he said 'dead'. "We must find him, Jim!"

Yes, Kirk thought, *we must find him. But, where...?*

"Mister Chekov. Oshitar 8? What do we know about it?" Kirk suddenly asked.

"Oshitar 8 is a class N planet in its glacial stage. Very windy. Temperatures range from -10 by day to -40 at night. Not conducive to life." Chekov's response was fast.

"Scan it!" Kirk ordered. Then he waited along with the rest of the bridge crew.

"Captain! It's the shuttle! I've found it! It's a miracle!" Chekov shouted.

"A hunch, Jim?" McCoy asked, looking into Kirk's eyes. Kirk didn't answer. A hunch? Yes. A hunch and nothing else.

Roberts was about to give in. She could barely keep awake but knew she shouldn't sleep as that way lay death. When she heard the faint whirr of the transporter beam and saw Kirk, McCoy, Chekov, some Security men and a medical team materialise she thought she was delirious.

She was only sure that they were really there when McCoy began to examine her. Without being aware of what she was doing, she began to cry.

"How is she?" Kirk asked McCoy.

"She's in shock but she'll be all right, Jim," the Doctor replied as he injected the young woman with a hypo.

"Roberts, where is Mister Spock? What happened?" Kirk urged her.

"Jim! Don't do this. She's too weak and shocked..."

"We need to know where Spock is!" Kirk interrupted McCoy firmly.

Roberts moved her right hand to Spock's tricorder. Its homing signal was still active.

"There's a message from Mister Spock. It explains everything," said the young Ensign unsteadily.

"The shuttle crashed not very long after the Enterprise was out of range. Mister Spock thought this was Oshitar 8. Everyone else aboard the shuttle died. It was terrible... terrible... I tried to follow Mister Spock but I couldn't," Roberts explained tearfully.

"Of course you couldn't. Your leg is in a terrible state." McCoy tried to calm her down.

Kirk picked up Spock's tricorder. He switched off the homing device and activated its display. Spock's message appeared.

"Chekov!" Kirk shouted after reading it out. "Find those co-ordinates."

"Over there," Chekov said turning to the massive mountain.

"Let's go, Bones," Kirk gestured to McCoy to follow him.

The three Starfleet officers left the cave. It had stopped snowing. A cold, cobalt blue light illuminated the scene. They headed for the mountain.

Kirk looked at the mountain. It was impressive, high and completely covered in snow.

If I wasn't so worried about Spock, Kirk thought. *I could really enjoy all this. I never saw anything quite like this.*

Oshitar began to set. Its large swollen blue shape, already low on the horizon, turned a deeper blue. It sent its last rays of light to embrace everything and the ice-capped mountain joyfully reflected the light as if it was saying good-night. As a result Kirk and his two companions were plunged into a beautiful, unreal scenario.

Kirk took a deep breath. After a moment of wonder Chekov began scanning.

"There's no sign of life here or within a fifty kilometre range, sir. Maybe Mister Spock changed his mind and went elsewhere," he said.

A little spark of blue light from the ground caught Kirk's attention. He bent down and picked up Spock's small exploration tricorder.

"No, Mister Chekov. Spock has been here." He showed his find to the others.

"Now what, Jim?" McCoy asked Kirk. He was worried.

The Captain didn't answer. *Give me a sign, Spock. Tell me where you are! I want to know where you are! Are you all right? Oh my, friend that's all I want right now*, he thought.

Suddenly McCoy and Chekov saw Kirk surrounded by an aura of light. Then he vanished.

Kirk couldn't see what was happening to him. The sudden flash of light blinded him. Then he felt a sudden acceleration; his body fought not to react. Flashes of blue, red and green light exploded around him. His head reeled, confusing him further. Suddenly the velocity decreased and a moment later he

hit the surface.

There was no longer any snow. Kirk turned onto his back and looked at the sky. It was red and ochre. It was hot. Too hot... It was difficult to breathe. He didn't know where he was but he wasn't on Oshitar 8 any longer. He turned again and started. Spock stood in front of him.

Kirk recognised Spock's family's properties on Vulcan and he could see Mount Seleya in the background. He was on Vulcan, even if he didn't know how he'd got there! But that wasn't important ... Spock was here.

Kirk moved to join the Vulcan and bumped into an invisible barrier. He tried again, with the same result.

Spock was unaware of his presence. Kirk called to him but he seemed unable to hear him.

"You can't touch him. Your last wish was to know where he was and to see if he was well. You said nothing about staying with him." The voice was powerful.

"Who's speaking?" Kirk asked, looking around. "Where are you?"

"I was speaking. I am ... I don't know who I am. I have had many names. What do you want to call me, biped being?"

"Why are you holding Mister Spock?"

"Hold? I do not hold him. He was about to freeze to death. His last wish was to be back home. This is his home, isn't it?" the voice asked.

"Yes, it is his home, the planet Vulcan; but you can't ..."

"Is he your friend?" the voice asked abruptly.

"Yes, he's my friend," Kirk replied, surprised. He noticed something different in the voice, something lower and meaningful.

"Are you Kirk?" the voice asked unexpectedly.

"Yes..." Kirk replied in a whisper. "How do you know that?"

The voice was silent for a long moment before it replied. "I read your name in your friend's mind. He values you. You are lucky, Kirk."

Now Kirk knew what the difference in the voice meant. It was sadness. Sadness and loneliness. He felt hope rise in his heart.

"Are you feeling lonely?" he asked. Then as the voice didn't answer, he continued, "How long have you been alone?"

"It is a long time since a biped being called to me," the voice said, and it seemed to come from a long way away.

Now! Kirk thought. It was time to launch his attack.

"Let us be friends. I can be your friend, if you wish. And Spock can too, I'm sure. Read his mind," he pleaded.

The voice was hesitant.

"I know what you feel. I'm alone too, somehow. There have been times when I've felt so desperately alone that the only thing I wished for was death. And I have tried to die. Friendship saved me; let me help you," Kirk continued almost to himself.

"The biped being you call Spock is important to you?"

"Yes. He helped me not to die, to continue to live."

"You love him. You are willing to do anything to help him," the voice said.

"Yes," Kirk replied even though he knew it was unnecessary. After all it could read his mind and knew everything he thought before he could say it.

"You would be willing to lose that friendship if you thought it was the right thing for him," the voice continued reading Kirk's mind.

"Yes," Kirk said.

"But that is completely illogical. Spock is your friend. You love him. How can you renounce his friendship voluntarily? Wouldn't that cause you pain? Where is the logic in that?" the voice argued.

"Feelings aren't logical. When you love someone, a woman, a friend, you have to be ready to let her... him... go, if you know for sure that it's right for them, however painful it may be for you," Kirk concluded in a whisper. *Carol...* he thought, and was overwhelmed by a rush of memories.

"To sacrifice yourself for love... It is a difficult concept," the voice said partly to itself. "Would your friend, Spock, do the same for you?"

"Yes. You can bet on it," Kirk replied immediately. The voice didn't answer. Kirk waited for a response but nothing happened.

"Voice," he called loudly. There was still no answer.

"Voice! Speak! Where are you? Voice!!!" Kirk called again.

The voice wasn't there. It was gone.

Kirk looked at Spock standing just in front of him. The Vulcan was testing the force-field holding him with his right fore-finger. He was still unaware of Kirk's presence.

The Captain called Spock's name loudly but after seeing it was completely useless he dropped his arms and sat down on a stone on the ground. He could feel desperation growing in his heart.

"You were right, Kirk. Your friend feels as you feel. He would be willing to renounce your friendship if he thought it was the right thing to do. Just as you would." The voice was back abruptly.

Kirk started. *It went to read Spock's mind*, he thought.

"Yes," the Captain urged. "That's what friendship is about."

"Friendship..." the voice said. "It is a good concept."

Kirk decided it was time to try again.

"Set him free," he said. "He has his life to live. You can't hold him. It would kill him. Worse than kill him. If you let him leave," he said, hesitating, "I'll stay with you."

For a moment nothing happened then a abrupt flash of light flung Kirk back the way he had come. He materialised in front of a wondering McCoy and Chekov, and was closely followed by Spock.

"Jim, Spock! Are you all right?" asked McCoy.

"Yes, Bones. Don't worry," Kirk reassured him. Then he turned to Spock.

"What was it?" he asked.

"Fascinating, Jim. It was the planet. A living planet... the only one of its kind." Spock's reply was immediate. Obviously he had been well aware of what had been happening.

"It will die alone. Won't it?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, Jim. The Federation will interdict this quadrant."

"But all it wanted was a chance, a last chance to survive! I ..." Kirk hesitated, "... I can see it, Spock."

The Vulcan went to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Kirk closed his eyes and thought, *I'm sorry*, as strongly as he could.

//Don't worry, Kirk. I'm happy. I won't be alone. I have a friend now. Goodbye, my friend// the voice came, and then it was gone.

Kirk opened his eyes. He was crying.

"Are you all right, Jim?" asked McCoy.

"Yes, I'm all right, Bones."

He had never felt so well. *Goodbye, my friend!*

SPOCK

A lonely childhood, without companions,
Fearing my Humanity would show
When childish taunts caused pain.

A youth spent in striving to perfect
The Vulcan teaching of non-emotion,
Using logic to hide my Human feelings.

Seeking a life among stars
Aboard a ship crewed by Humans,
But even here my feelings I keep hidden.

Then one man came who held out hope.
He offered me friendship without strings
In full acceptance of all that I am.

An acceptance that shines with sincerity,
A sincerity that holds me willingly
In a friendship I thought never to know.

Maureen Frost

PERCEPTIONS

by

Jean Sloan

Spock stared out at the arid red plains of Vulcan. In the distance the gaunt outline of Mount Seleya reached towards the giant sun. Heat-haze shimmered on the land. As the Vulcan turned ShiKahr came into view, white, orderly, silent in the midday sun. Spock moved towards the town, towards his home which lay on the outskirts. He approached from the desert, entering Amanda's garden, and waited, watching...

"Homesick, Spock?" Jim Kirk leaned over the Vulcan's shoulder.

Spock almost jumped. He had not heard Kirk entering his cabin, he had been so absorbed in the holoscene which he was in the process of creating. He switched the console off and looked up at his Captain.

"How's it coming?" Kirk asked with interest.

"Quite slowly, Jim. I am merely experimenting with theories here. I will be unable to develop my work properly until I have access to the Intergalactic Computer Centre's facilities. Unless I take over the Rec Room computer system, of course."

"That wouldn't be a proper move, Spock."

"Precisely, Captain. I will wait until the Conference, I think."

The Enterprise was on a direct heading to Memory Alpha, where Spock was to attend a conference on Virtual Imaging; the aim of the conference was to consider the development of recreational facilities for crews on deep space missions. It was fairly surprising to Kirk that Spock found interest in developing leisure facilities, but he supposed that it was the intellectual challenge of the task that was the attraction. The ship was to drop the Vulcan off for his conference, then proceed to the planet Chiron to check on the progress of the new settlers on that world.

For several weeks, James T Kirk had seen little of his First Officer except on duty. Spock had spent all his free time 'communing with the computer' (McCoy's phrase - the Doctor had declared that he had never seen the Vulcan so happy.) Although he had missed his chess games with Spock, and the sheer relaxation of being in the Vulcan's company, Kirk had been tolerant. The Conference would soon be over, and then he would have his companion back. Meanwhile, he knew that Spock loved any kind of intellectual challenge.

T'Vedis of Vulcan examined her quarters with satisfaction. They were uncluttered, utilitarian, unlike the often needlessly luxurious accommodations often found in facilities designed by Humans. She activated the view-window and looked out at the star-filled sky. Tomorrow the conference would begin; now she had business to attend to. Snapping the shutters closed, she sat at her computer terminal and called up the

list of delegates. What she saw made her almost sigh with satisfaction. Perhaps here was a chance to complete her existence, for her life at present was without meaning.

T'Vedis was Vulcan-born, but she was born without mind powers, without the ability to bond with a mate. Vulcan was a technologically and socially advanced planet, but for a female the support of a bondmate, the furthering of the race, was still of prime importance. Careers gave way to the drive. Psi-null, she was virtually ostracised. She was high-born, but without any hope of bonding with one of a suitable family. She had turned to a brilliant career to fill the gap in her life that she had only recently acknowledged, but it was not enough; and now here was Spock, half Human... perhaps... an opportunity...

She took note of the number of the room which Spock would occupy when he arrived the following day. She had no difficulty in finding the quarters, and it took her only a minute to gain entrance. She dismantled the water cooler expertly; quickly she inserted the small device where it would not be detected, replaced the cooler components, and slipped out unseen.

Three days into the conference Spock stood on Mount Seleya, looking at the desert below. Nothing moved except the eternal heat-haze. He shaded his eyes, able to distinguish the roofs of ShiKahr in the distance. He turned away, and slowly descended from his rocky eyrie.

Reaching the desert floor he extended a hand, found and flicked a switch. The images faded, leaving him in a strange room with metallic strips lining the walls. Two people entered, Dr Paul Hudson and a Vulcan female whom Hudson introduced as T'Vedis. Spock inclined his head, acknowledging the introduction.

"Well, congratulations, Commander Spock," continued Hudson, proffering a hand.

T'Vedis watched the gesture with distaste, but Spock returned the handshake.

Hudson looked around. "The holoroom works well - most impressive. How many scenarios do you have?"

"Only two at present," replied Spock. He did something to a wall panel, and the Bridge of the Enterprise appeared around them, perfect in every detail. "It is a simple matter to create more holoscenes," he continued. "However, I now wish to concentrate on devising an event sequence for each scene."

"In which men may be heroes," smiled Hudson.

"Precisely, sir." Spock dissolved the image and turned to face the galaxy's leading computer experts.

"You understand the Human need for relaxation well, Mr Spock."

"All sentient beings need to relax, Dr Hudson. Only the manner of it differs." As he spoke Spock became aware that T'Vedis was subjecting him to an almost impolite scrutiny. He turned to her.

"And you, T'Vedis - how is your project progressing?"

"Satisfactorily, Spock. I do not feel the need to work on games to stretch the Human imagination, however. I am pursuing new methods of testing logic, to

improve brain function."

"Which would no doubt be a game to a Vulcan," commented Hudson cheerfully. "Come on, folks, let's eat."

They repaired to the dining room, where the conversation moved on to technical discussion.

It was many hours later that Spock returned to his quarters. Before he retired he drank several glasses of water from the cooler, as was his habit. Strangely, he had been unusually thirsty the last two days. He assumed that the phenomenon was connected to the setting of the life support system of the planetoid which housed the main computer facility.

Spock rose early the following morning, intent on returning to work on his project before the start of the day's programme of seminars. As he dressed he felt suddenly hot and dizzy. He turned his attention inward to his biorhythms, but failed to account for the unusual occurrence. Dismissing his temporary weakness as unimportant he fetched a glass of water to slake his now ever-persistent thirst. If the unusual thirst persisted, or if he experienced any further episodes of weakness, he would, he decided, consult McCoy on his return to the Enterprise.

The day passed without incident. Between seminars he worked in the holoroom. The last seminar of the day saw him briefing a group of Starfleet cadets on his project. As he concluded his lecture he became aware of T'Vedis on the periphery of his vision. When the cadets filed out, she waited.

"T'Vedis, can I be of assistance?"

"Spock, I would ask thee a personal question."

Spock elevated one eyebrow, but said nothing. Taking this as encouragement to proceed, T'Vedis came forward.

"I wish to understand why thee are working on such an insignificant project. A Vulcan of thy intellect could surely find more worthwhile employment."

"All intellectual endeavour is worthy, T'Vedis. You" - he avoided the more familiar 'thee', her use of which had troubled him since it was normally employed between family members or exceptionally close friends - "are aware that I serve aboard a Starship with a mainly Human crew."

She inclined her head in confirmation.

"Stress levels among Humans are high, even in normal circumstances. Shipboard life is abnormal; the Humans live in closer proximity than they would planetside, and in deep space the threat of danger is always present. Stress levels are exacerbated by these factors, and though the Humans concerned have learned to cope with the stress, it is essential that means of releasing it are available. If my project is successful, I am contributing to the efficiency of Starship operation."

"That is logical, Spock; but why does thee choose to exist in an environment which must surround thee with painful emotion?"

"My mental shields are adequate, T'Vedis." Spock's voice was toneless. Jim Kirk would have instantly understood the sign of displeasure at the invasion of privacy.

"Spock, I am honoured that thee

have answered my questions. I apologise for the intrusion into thy personal affairs. I am a scientist, and curiosity is a failing that I have long since admitted in myself."

"Curiosity is never a failing if it leads to a solution to a problem."

If T'Vedis understood that she had been mildly rebuked she gave no sign of it. She glided out of the room, Spock noticing the grace of her movements despite himself. He was left with a vague feeling of unease for which he could not quite account.

T'Vedis returned to her quarters thoughtfully. She had hoped that the half-Human Spock would be mind-blind as she was. No matter. She would proceed with her plan.

At breakfast the next day Spock's feeling of unease had not lessened. During his period of meditation the previous evening he had found concentration difficult. All his senses had seemed heightened in a manner which he found profoundly disturbing. His introspection was interrupted by Hudson asking if he minded company.

"Good morning, Commander. May I join you?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

Hudson settled his tray, piled high with bacon and eggs. Spock's stomach churned at the sight and smell, but he exerted control. Dr Hudson was speaking.

"Yesterday evening I went down to the holoroom. I see you have developed your Vulcan scenario. You could call it 'Lost in the Desert'."

Spock nodded. "However, I have not completed the event sequence. It has neither a beginning nor an end, only a middle. I propose to offer a number of alternatives from which persons using the scenario for entertainment can choose. I am still working on the details."

"You've been working solidly since you arrived, Spock. Why don't you take a break? You look as if you could use one."

Spock was saved from the necessity of commenting on this disturbing observation as the talk moved on to technical matters. He hadn't realised that his increasing physical weakness was so obvious.

Eventually Hudson excused himself and left the dining room. Spock was about to leave also when T'Vedis approached his table, tray in hand.

"May I join you, Spock? I have brought you some Altair water."

Spock took the drink gratefully and drained the glass. "I thought you did not approve of me, T'Vedis." As soon as he had made the comment he wondered what had made him do so.

"Approve, Spock? I neither approve nor disapprove. I pass no judgement on you."

Spock noticed she had dropped the familiar 'thee'; to his surprise, he found that he regretted the fact.

"You find my choice of project demeaning, and you reacted unfavourably when I shook hands with Dr Hudson when we first met." Again he was surprised to hear his own words, and he had not been consciously aware of noting the incident of the handshake.

"I was merely surprised at an action

unusual for a Vulcan. But you have lived among Humans for a considerable time - it is no doubt necessary to employ their customs for their own comfort."

"I am half Human."

"I know. You are the son of Ambassador Sarek."

Spock was mildly surprised that she knew. "Do you always research the backgrounds of colleagues?"

"I did no research. You are well known in scientific circles, Spock."

She began to eat her meal, and Spock found himself scrutinising her closely. He pulled himself up - he was behaving in a most unVulcan manner...

Suddenly, with growing horror, he realised that he felt physically attracted to her. As she raised her eyes to look at him he saw in their depths the same awareness. He excused himself quickly and returned to his quarters; he felt hot, and again had a raging thirst. He drank deeply to quench it, then settled to meditate.

With apprehension he realised that his responses over the last few days had become increasingly emotional. His concentration was deteriorating, his work was suffering. He had found himself thinking often of T'Vedis... He turned his gaze inward, but could not accept the reality he found there. He could not be entering pon farr... seven years had not passed...

For twenty-four hours Spock avoided company as far as possible, hoping that his problem would pass, but it did not. As he tried to occupy his mind with work he found his concentration deteriorating. He was gripped with sensations: nameless dread; bouts of trembling; visions of T'Vedis which he could not wash from his mind; and always the thirst... He took refuge in the holoscene of his own creation, finding comfort in the Vulcan desert.

After one particularly violent bout of trembling he knelt weakly on his Vulcan plain. He could no longer avoid recognising that he had indeed entered pon farr. He must decide what he should do. He could not wait for the Enterprise's return, and in any case he would not wish his friends to witness his shame and see him suffer an agonising death they could do nothing about. He must leave Memory Alpha, find a refuge to wait out his fate...

The door to the holoroom swished open, and closed. There on the Vulcan plain stood T'Vedis.

The Vulcan woman surveyed Spock with satisfaction. Her plan was working. She no longer wore the plain jumpsuit which was standard dress on Memory Alpha; instead a shimmering blue Vulcan robe outlined her slim figure. Spock felt the heat rising within him.

"NO!"

His half-strangled sob echoed curiously in his head. He fled the holoroom, returned to his quarters and set the privacy lock, but he found no respite. Images of T'Vedis haunted him. He buried his face in his hands, trying to shut them out.

"Spock. Look at me. I can help thee."

In his extremity he had not heard her enter, nor did he stop to wonder how she had learned his door code. He looked at her outstretched hands, his resistance failing. Feelings of great shame were mixed with overwhelming desire. She

took his hands in hers and pulled him gently towards the alcove which contained his bed.

Spock opened his eyes slowly. He felt clear-headed and calm. The bedclothes were disordered, and he realised that he was naked. His clothes lay on the floor in an untidy heap.

Disturbed by his movement, T'Vedis woke and reached for him.

"No." His voice was gruff as he pushed her back into the pillows. "That will not be necessary."

She propped herself up on one elbow. "The fever has burned for almost twenty-four Earth time periods - not long. Thee are quite well now, my husband?"

Spock looked at her, full realisation dawning. He opened his mind to her, but felt no answering resonance.

"We have not bonded." It was a statement rather than a question.

"It seems that we did not succeed in doing so. Perhaps because the physical need was so great..." She tailed off, looking at her body.

Spock saw the marks of light bruising, his mind flooding with shame. "I did that?"

"Thee could not help it. It was the blood fever which drove thee."

Spock left the bed. "I must dress. There is much to do - my Captain will return for me in two days, and there is my assignment to complete. We must talk, and decide how our futures are to be spent."

More than anything he wanted to escape from the room, to meditate. He did not know what to say to this woman who had so unexpectedly entered his life.

"We will, of course, spend our future together, Spock. My family takes a traditional view of married life."

Spock hesitated. "Yes." Only now did the implications of what had happened start to become clear to him. Of course, he could not stay on the Enterprise, with a wife who was not of Starfleet.

"We will return to Vulcan." T'Vedis spoke with conviction. "Thee must return to thy rightful place in they family, and we will work together at the Science Academy."

"Of course." Spock could not think at all. "But first I must work to finish my project. I will return later."

He left the room hurriedly, going where his steps took him, paying little heed to his surroundings. He found himself in the holoroom, and instinctively switched on the image generator without selecting the programme.

Suddenly he was on the Bridge of his holo Enterprise. Overcome with an overwhelming sense of loss, he sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

Leonard McCoy leaned his arm nonchalantly on the back of James T Kirk's command chair. "It'll be good to have Spock back," he enthused. "He's the only person on this ship worth having an argument with."

"Be careful, Bones - I'll tell him," Kirk grinned.

McCoy cocked his head on one side. "Also, Captain sir, it'll make a change to have a good-tempered leader."

"Doctor, are you implying that I've been difficult to live with?"

"You could say that, Jim."

Kirk had the grace to look ashamed. "Well, Spock takes so much of the petty bureaucracy off my hands, and the Chiron settlers didn't exactly fall over themselves to thank us for our concern. If I hadn't had to submit a detailed report on the viability of the world, I'd have told Councillor Mahon what to go do with himself..."

His reminiscences were interrupted by Uhura.

"Memory Alpha in hailing range, Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Contact Mr Spock. Mr Chekov, calculate time to agreed beam up." Jim Kirk's voice was warm with enthusiasm. He had missed his First Officer - and not just for the reasons he had given McCoy.

"I have Mr Spock now, Captain."

"Put him on audio, Lieutenant."

"Good day, Captain. I trust your mission was successful?"

McCoy beat the Captain to a reply. "Hello, Spock. Had a good time playing with computers and discussing abstruse theories, then?"

"Good day, Dr McCoy," said Spock's voice wryly. "You sound well - your level of emotion sounds normal for your species."

"You green-blooded... I was just trying to be friendly."

"Bones," Jim Kirk cut in. He wanted to get down to business. "Mr Spock, we will be ready for you to beam aboard in approximately fifty minutes."

"Captain..." There was hesitation in the voice, and Jim Kirk, recognising it, stiffened.

"Spock? Something wrong?"

"Sir, I must speak to you - in private."

"I'll go to my quarters. I can talk to..."

"No, Captain. I would prefer to see you in person. Could you beam down to the complex, please? Alone."

The tone of voice was almost pleading. Kirk cast a worried glance in McCoy's direction.

"All right, Spock. I'll see you in fifty minutes. Give Chekov the coordinates. Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters until beam down."

Sulu and Chekov exchanged glances as Kirk headed for the turbolift, shadowed by McCoy.

"What now?" breathed Sulu. "I thought the idea of leave was too good to be true."

As the turbolift moved off McCoy faced the Captain. "You can't go on your own, Jim. Something's wrong. Spock didn't sound at all himself. He joked with me, for god's sake! And that sounded mighty like desperation in his voice when he spoke to you. How do you know it's safe?"

"I don't, Bones. But he wants me

alone, and that's how he's getting me."

Kirk materialised on Memory Alpha, looking around the large transporter complex anxiously for his First Officer. Spock was suddenly by his side.

"Jim."

Kirk turned to face him, taking in all the signs of strain which Spock was trying to hide. "Spock, what's wrong?"

"Not here, Captain. Come with me, please."

He led Kirk to one of the many small tutorial rooms. Kirk sat down, fixing his gaze on Spock's face. The Vulcan could not meet that gaze.

"This is difficult, Jim. Personal..."

Kirk frowned. "Just say it, Spock. The tension is killing me."

"Unlikely, Jim." The Vulcan relaxed very slightly. "Captain, I am not coming back to the ship. I am... wedded."

Kirk caught his breath in shock, but said nothing.

Spock continued slowly. "It is, as you know, the custom on Vulcan for married couples to stay together. This is not possible in Starfleet for us. My wife is a private citizen. I must resign."

"It's not a requirement of Vulcan law, living together. Some married couples do live separate lives." Kirk kept his voice neutral, with some difficulty.

"Not in my family, Captain, nor in any of the high-born families of my world. We respect tradition, as must I."

Kirk felt afraid. He had often thought he might lose Spock, but not like this. He had known Spock would - must - eventually take a wife, but he had expected - if he had thought about it - that the couple would live separately. Now he realised that his expectation was unreasonable. If Spock loved a woman he had the right to happiness with her. It was just so sudden, and... Kirk looked at Spock closely. The Vulcan did not have the air of a man who was happy.

"Spock, do you love her?"

"Jim, I... No Vulcan would admit to loving his wife. Vulcans marry because it is logical to do so when the time is right." Spock gave slight emphasis to the word 'time', looking faintly embarrassed. It was the nearest he could come to revealing the truth to the Captain.

Kirk paused, staring. "It isn't seven years since... What happened?"

The Vulcan looked at him at last, and seeing the sympathy in Kirk's eyes felt able to tell the truth after all. As Spock related his experiences, Kirk noticed the tiny signs of strain around his friend's eyes, Spock looked thinner, too... ill...

"So now, although there has been no ceremony, we are - married."

"But not bonded."

Spock was startled by Jim Kirk's perception, and his slight reaction showed.

"You would've said you were bonded if you had - married is not a Vulcan term. You're always exact," Kirk offered by way of explanation.

"We did not achieve a bond, Jim. T'Vedis thinks that it might be my

Human half which prevented the... normal... sequence of events from occurring."

Spock's head dropped, making him a picture of abject misery. Kirk put a hand gently on his friend's shoulder.

"Spock, your bond with T'Pring worked - and you've never had any difficulty forming a link with Humans and other life forms. Why not with her?"

"I am at somewhat of a loss, Jim. But the circumstances are... different."

The last work, spoken hesitantly, revealed to Jim Kirk the depth of his First Officer's embarrassment with the subject. He realised how hard it had been for Spock to explain. He released the Vulcan.

"Spock, I am grateful that you have told me. I know you didn't have to. Thank you. What do you want to do now?"

"I want you to meet T'Vedis, Jim. Then I would like, with your permission, to offer my resignation with effect from today. I will, of course, finish my tour of duty if I am needed."

Kirk considered for a moment. "I'll support your immediate departure if that's what you want. But Spock, I will never say that you are not needed."

He was about to continue when a Vulcan woman of outstanding beauty and grace entered the room.

"My husband." She inclined her head to Spock.

"T'Vedis." Spock rose. "This is my Captain, James T Kirk. Captain, meet T'Vedis."

Feeling self-conscious under the woman's rather haughty gaze, Kirk made a passable Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, T'Vedis." He turned to Spock, trying to control his emotions. "God go with you, Spock," he smiled. He reached out to clasp the Vulcan's hand. "Take care, and keep in touch."

"I will, Jim." The slight tremor in Spock's voice was instantly stilled, and James Kirk left his First Officer, watched by a pair of disapproving eyes.

"Thee has feelings for this Human, my husband?" asked T'Vedis when the door had closed.

"He was my commanding officer," Spock replied slowly. "And he is my friend."

T'Vedis' eyebrows arched slightly upwards in close imitation of Spock's.

By the time Jim Kirk got back to the ship he was in a towering rage. He walked onto the Bridge and barked out,

"Maintain orbit, Mr Sulu. I'll be in Sickbay." He stepped back into the car before anyone could move.

"So much for shore leave!" exclaimed Sulu, catching Uhura's eye.

McCoy was not in his office when Kirk arrived, so he paged the Doctor. When McCoy arrived the Captain was pacing up and down.

"Jim, sit down, please."

The Captain complied, but two minutes later was up again, his agitation moving him.

The story spilled out, more or less coherently. When he had run out of

steam Kirk sank once more into the chair he had briefly occupied.

McCoy looked at Kirk thoughtfully. "I know it's come as a shock, Jim, but aren't you over-reacting? Casting this girl in the role of some sort of witch?"

"She's done something to him, Bones. He looks sort of... defeated."

"Jim, the time of pon farr is physically very debilitating. Spock is probably just exhausted, and a little sad at leaving the ship - not that he'd admit it, of course."

"Exactly, Bones. Why is he leaving? He obviously didn't want to."

"He explained, Jim. Family customs..."

"...be damned, Doctor. There was never any question of him staying on Vulcan with T'Pring. Why the change?"

"I don't recall anyone getting round to discussing Spock's future with T'Pring, Jim. Perhaps he loves T'Vedis, doesn't want to leave her."

"No, Bones. I know Spock. He did *not* want to go. She's got some sort of hold on him."

"Jim, she saved his life. Hasn't that occurred to you?"

"It occurred to me, Doctor."

"Well, you sound as if you wish she hadn't mated with him."

The cold biological fact made Kirk flinch. He'd been dealing in euphemisms.

McCoy pressed on. "He has an obligation to her on that account at the very least. According to text books, mating in pon farr produces offspring in 85% of cases, so there may be a child to consider. Jim, you've got to examine your own feelings. Perhaps it's just that you don't want to let him go. Jim... maybe you're jealous."

Kirk was quiet for several moments. "I considered that possibility, Doctor. I'm not blind to my own selfishness. Of course I don't want him to leave, for extremely selfish reasons which I won't discuss, but I would *always* put Spock's happiness first. Doctor, he *wasn't happy*. I'm going back to talk to him."

McCoy sighed as his impetuous Captain and friend headed for the transporter room.

Spock knelt in the computer-generated Vulcan desert, trying to quieten the turmoil in his mind and heart. His inability to bond with T'Vedis troubled him, had a wrongness about it. He lowered his mental shields, seeking some resonance of her mind within his own: but there was nothing.

No, there was an echo, a mind searching for him, wanting his presence. Concern enveloped him as his shields dropped further. He was bathed in the warmth of concern, and reached out to answer...

But it was not T'Vedis' mind that he contacted. It was Jim Kirk's.

Guided by the unexpected mind touch, the Captain reached the holoroom and went in. Kneeling in his black Vulcan robes, Spock looked very alien, but the eyes he turned to Kirk were pain-filled.

"Jim, why have you come?"

Kirk considered. "Spock, why did you contact my mind just now?"

"It was... unintentional. I apologise for the intrusion."

"You know I don't care about that. Spock, you were looking for her, weren't you? This may be out of turn - perhaps I shouldn't get involved - but I'm sure she's using you."

"Captain, there is no logic in your statement."

"I'm not interested in logic, Spock. I am interested in gut reaction. I repeat, though you may hate me for it, that woman is using you. And out of an over-developed sense of duty, you are allowing her to do so."

"Jim, I..."

"No, Spock. I've changed my mind about releasing you from your contract. I want you to stay with the ship until I get a replacement for you. It'll give you some thinking time."

"Jim, you have no right to judge my relationship with T'Vedis." Though the words were a reprimand, the tone of voice was gentle. "You are aware that she saved my life?"

"I am, and don't think that she doesn't have my gratitude for that. Look, Spock, I saw in your mind your confusion. You need time. And I *am* your friend. I don't believe you can't form a marriage bond. It's her. I believe she might be psi-null."

Spock looked surprised. "That is a possibility I had not considered. However, Jim, it changes nothing."

"Yes it does. It suggests interesting possibilities for her motives. Come on, let's go back to the ship."

Spock did not move. A sense of relief, quickly quashed, warred with his sense of duty.

Realising Spock was not beside him, Kirk looked back. The Vulcan was still kneeling, his form radiating tension, his eyes closed. Kirk returned quickly and touched Spock's arm, offering comfort.

At the physical contact Spock stiffened. Kirk had a brief sense of a strong need to control before the Vulcan gently pushed him away.

"Spock, I'm sorry. It's Human instinct to comfort..." He felt awkward.

"Jim," Spock interrupted, "you are my Captain, but you cannot direct me in all things. I will of course return to the ship, but first I must take leave of my wife. I will follow you up." He rose and started for the door, but turned to Kirk again as it opened.

"Jim, I regret my loss of control. My shields have not recovered from pon farr - physical contact is unusually painful for me. I thank you for your Human... instinct... and your care. I did not wish to hurt you. You must understand, whatever T'Vedis' motives, as you put it, I now have a duty to her." There was a slight emphasis on the word duty. "You must not try to marginalise that duty."

Kirk felt uncomfortable with the sentiment, knowing it was an accurate assessment of his attitude. Before he could reply, Spock was gone.

The Captain beamed back to the ship, sought out McCoy, and brought the Doctor fully up to date with events. McCoy watched Kirk as he talked, noting

the signs of tension.

"Jim, Spock's right. You can't interpret his duty for him, whatever you think of this woman. Are you sure your heart isn't ruling your head? You have to face the possibility that he may be in the right."

"But Bones, if he goes back to Vulcan he won't be happy. He can provide for her and any children while serving in Starfleet."

"Jim, that's a chauvinistic attitude if ever I heard one. And how do you know that he won't be happy? You always knew that eventually Spock would have to take a wife; right, so it's all a bit sudden, but it may work out for the best - for him."

Kirk looked at McCoy in dismay. He was certain that Spock did want to remain on the ship, but he could not rationalise the certainty for the Doctor's satisfaction. He could also admit that McCoy had a point. If Spock had a settled life on Vulcan it would take care of his future - a future which would give Spock many years of life after he, McCoy, Scotty and the Enterprise were dead and gone. Was he merely selfish in wanting Spock to stay? Were his suspicions of T'Vedis a figment of his imagination? He felt confused. He looked directly at the Doctor.

"Bones, maybe you're right. I know I don't want to lose Spock, but just to humour me, will you give him a medical when he beams back on board? He's very tense, and I believe his emotional control is precarious - that's always been a sign of some physical cause."

"Jim, I'd do that anyway, under the circumstances. Go and get some rest - and calm down."

Jim Kirk returned to his quarters. His gut reaction to Spock's predicament still said that the Vulcan was in a snare, caught by a scheming woman who saw the high-born Spock as a ticket to respectability on their homeworld, but he had not one shred of evidence to back this up. McCoy's view was persuasive, but the Doctor was without the information about the marriage bond, or lack of it. He didn't feel that he could impart that knowledge to the Doctor without Spock's permission, if the fact made any difference. Spock had admitted that his only relationship with T'Vedis was the physical joining, but as that had saved his life it was quite logical that Spock should see that his duty lay with her, in the Vulcan way.

"No, dammit! It doesn't feel right..."

Kirk first ascertained that Spock had returned to the ship, then beamed down to the science complex to search for T'Vedis.

"Doctor McCoy, there is nothing wrong with me. I do not require a medical."

"You are still an officer on this ship, Spock. My orders are..."

"So the Captain has told you the reason I wanted to see him."

Blast! thought McCoy. *He's going to be really difficult.*

"Yes, Spock. Now come on."

But the arguments did not continue. Spock gave in gracefully.

Kirk tracked T'Vedis down in a lab

on Level 5 of the Memory Alpha complex.

"Good day, Captain Kirk. How may I be of assistance?"

"I want to talk to you about Spock."

"I do not discuss personal matters with outworlders."

"Nevertheless, I want you to realise something. Spock holds an important position in Starfleet. He is held in respect and esteem. His career is successful. If you make him give that up, he is giving up an important part of his life and achievement. You saved his life, but now you will ruin it."

"That is not logical, Captain Kirk. I have had little contact with Humans, but I see that their emotionalism is not exaggerated. You are Spock's friend, are you not?"

"He told you that?" Kirk was surprised.

"Yes. You see that he does trust me. Your doubts about my integrity are unfounded, Captain. Is it possible that your doubts for his future are really fears for your own without him?"

People keep asking me that, one way or another, thought Kirk uncomfortably.

T'Vedis carried on relentlessly. "This emotion - love - seems to be at the foundation of Human philosophy - I have studied your literature - but it is essentially selfish, is it not?"

"It can be," admitted Kirk, "but if I felt Spock really wished to go, I would wish him happiness. I think he would prefer to stay."

"You are wrong, Captain. He sees our future together on Vulcan."

"How can you be so certain? You have not known him long."

"Captain, the knowledge of the Vulcan marriage bond goes deep."

Kirk stiffened. He had his proof - the woman was lying. What to do?

"T'Vedis, I accept what you say. I am sorry to have disturbed your work. Live long and prosper."

"Captain." She inclined her head, then turned her back on him.

Thoughtful, the Captain returned to the Enterprise. He had his own proof to confirm the rightness of his instincts, but it would not convince Spock. He needed more. He headed for Sickbay, where he found the Vulcan still undergoing tests.

"Well?" He addressed himself to McCoy.

"He's fine, Jim, apart from some slight hormonal imbalance - a legacy of pon farr, no doubt. You can sit up now, Spock. I just want a drop more blood."

Spock offered his arm, looking thoughtful. As McCoy hurried off to the lab he met the Captain's eyes.

"You have seen T'Vedis, Jim." It was a statement, not a question. "I am sorry, Captain, but my attempts to bond with her have weakened my mental shielding, as I explained, and your mind is very strong. I read your thoughts. I will endeavour not to do so again."

Suddenly Kirk saw a ray of hope. "Spock, I want you to do so again. I want you to understand what is troubling me.

I can't explain it to you."

"I cannot read thoughts in any detail, not without a meld. You did not know how to tell me that you had visited T'Vedis, and you were broadcasting your guilt. I can only sense very strong emotion without the meld."

"Then meld with me, Spock. I need you to understand. No-one else does."

Spock hesitated. In a meld Jim would see that his assessment of Spock's state of mind was accurate. Spock would have preferred to keep the Captain in ignorance of that fact. Their parting would be difficult enough as it was. However, Kirk had used the one word which could get to Spock - need.

"Very well, Jim."

Gently Spock's mind touched the dynamic mind of his Captain, and in that moment the Vulcan became ashamed that he had not been fully honest with Kirk, for he saw the concern, the genuine desire to do the best for Spock; and there too he saw T'Vedis' lie.

For his part Kirk learned that he had been correct in his assessment of Spock's state of mind. He saw the distress it caused Spock to choose his duty to T'Vedis over his desire to remain on the Enterprise, which he thought of as home. As the Vulcan withdrew from the meld Kirk drew back, a lump in his throat.

"She lied to me about you. I didn't know how to make you believe me. Now I understand that it makes no difference."

Spock nodded. "Even if she is using me, I still owe her my duty."

Kirk closed his eyes for a moment. "I know. I'll leave it alone, Spock. But she doesn't care for you at all. There has been no consideration from her about what *you* want, only what *she* wants."

Spock looked at his Captain mutely. There was nothing to say.

The silence was broken by McCoy returning from the labs. "Spock, there's something odd here. There are traces in your blood of a chemical that is used in Humans to stimulate the production of hormones which increase fertility. I don't know what the effect would be on a Vulcan, but I do know the substance does not occur naturally. You haven't taken any medication recently, have you?"

"No, Doctor, none."

"Look, I want you in Sickbay for a couple of hours - I've more tests to do. I want to establish the exact effect of this chemical on Vulcan metabolism, and if possible how it was ingested. Anyway, you could use the rest."

As McCoy led Spock off, Kirk returned to the Bridge. He felt drained. He hoped that McCoy would produce the proverbial rabbit out of a hat, and that he would not lose Spock, but the depth of the Vulcan's sense of duty was strong in his memory.

He thought the time had come - he had always known the time would come - when he would have to let his Vulcan friend go. Command would be a lonely place without that companionship.

The intercom interrupted his reverie.

"Kirk here. Bones?"

"Jim, I've found something."

"On my way. Kirk out."

. . . . .

"... and the tests show that the substance, called androxine, stimulates a hormone in the Vulcan male." McCoy paused, unconsciously dramatic. "That's the hormone that controls the Vulcan seven-year cycle."

Kirk glanced at Spock, whose expression was unreadable.

"Doctor, how was the androxine administered?" The Vulcan's voice was without inflexion.

"I can't say exactly, Spock, but it was taken with food or drink - most likely with liquid as certain enzymes in some foods would break down the substance and render it inactive. Have you been drinking anything unusual, prepared by someone else?"

"You think I have been deliberately... poisoned?"

Kirk exploded. "Oh, come off it, Spock! We both know who's responsible. T'Vedis."

"Captain, for a Vulcan to do or permit such a thing would be a violation of everything that is Vulcan. I cannot believe it of her."

"But who else would gain from throwing you into pon farr? Has she been plying you with drinks?"

"On one or two occasions, Captain, but mostly I drank from the water cooler in my quarters. I did find myself very thirsty much of the time, so I consumed water quite regularly from that source."

McCoy frowned. "Spock, androxine requires a considerable quantity of liquid for absorption, certainly more than is normal intake for a Vulcan. A regular dose of the substance would make you thirsty. Is there anything you ate every day?"

"No, Doctor. I did utilise the food processors, but I varied my diet. No-one could have known what I would consume."

"I think then that the regular source of the androxine must have been your water cooler, but to bring you to pon farr, you would have had to have a massive dose of the drug. You'd have noticed the taste - slightly bitter."

Spock started at McCoy, not really seeing the Doctor. In his mind he could see through the mists of the blood fever T'Vedis standing in his room, and he now realised that she had known the code to override the security lock. Then he heard her say, 'I have brought you a glass of Altair water.' That had been just before the blood fever had started to burn in earnest; and Altair water had a naturally bitter taste.

"Penny for them? Or are they worth much more?" Kirk was serious; he had been watching Spock closely throughout the exchange with McCoy. "For instance, are they worth a Vulcan lady's honour?"

Spock's eyes blazed. He rose abruptly and left Sickbay. Kirk and the Doctor exchanged glances, then Kirk rushed after the Vulcan, but he was too late; Spock had already beamed down.

Three hours later James T Kirk was again pacing the floor of McCoy's office.

"Where can he be, Bones? I should have followed him down immediately."

"Jim, he's got to sort this out for himself. We've interfered enough. Whatever decision he comes to now, we

must respect it."

"You mean *I* must, even if he stays with her. Surely he won't, after what she's done... Look, I can't stand it - I'm going down."

Instinct made Jim Kirk go to the holoroom, where he found Spock kneeling in his computer-generated Vulcan desert. His eyes were closed, his hands tightly clenched together.

"Spock." Kirk resisted the urge to shake the Vulcan. He sat down cross-legged on the floor and waited.

At last Spock's eyes opened and he looked at the Captain, his voice and face without expression.

"Are you all right?" Jim Kirk's voice was shaking.

"T'Vedis is dead."

"Dear god - how?" Kirk dreaded the answer.

"She took her own life. It was a thing of shame that she did. To be detected, for it to be known - no Vulcan could live under those circumstances. I told her of... the facts... then went to dismantle the water cooler. She said nothing. When I returned with this," he held up a small phial. "I found her. She was at the point of death. It was too late..."

"You mourn her death?"

"All waste of life is regrettable." Spock closed his eyes again.

For once James T Kirk did not know what to say. His First Officer's cold dignity dismayed him; he did not know how to react to it. He watched the Vulcan for a moment, then decided to be straightforward.

"Spock, I know I've handled this badly, and I'm sorry I've interrupted your privacy, but I need to know that you are all right." The Captain's tone was almost pleading.

When Spock did not move or speak Kirk reached out hesitantly and put his hand on his First Officer's arm. "Spock, please..."

Suddenly he was overwhelmed with waves of anger emanating from the Vulcan. Shocked, he removed his hand, but found his arm held in a vice-like grip that threatened to break it. He kept perfectly still - he could do little else - but he was sick with fear that the anger was directed at him, that his friendship with Spock had been destroyed forever.

The thought must have communicated itself to the Vulcan, because his eyes opened suddenly and he relaxed the grip on Kirk's arm, although he did not let go.

"No, Jim. Not you - never you. You have nothing to reproach yourself for. I feel great anger towards T'Vedis. I must master it, or I am no longer Vulcan."

"But Spock, you've every reason to be angry, after what she did."

"I am Vulcan. I should not feel violent emotions. It cannot be allowed."

"Spock, you're half Human. For god's sake, to all intents and purposes she raped you. It's natural for you to feel the way you do. It will pass, but for now it is healthy to feel the emotion. Spock, don't punish yourself because of some imaginary shortcomings on your part. She has punished you enough."

Kirk's tone had become very gentle as he spoke, and he felt Spock relax slightly. The brown eyes softened as they looked at him.

"My anger is illogical. T'Vedis is beyond it. I watched her die."

"Spock, it's not your fault that she's dead. She was responsible for her own actions. Why did she do it, do you know?"

Spock nodded. "She told me before she died. Her actions were based on misapplied logic. She was, as your intuition told you, psi-null. The condition is not unknown. Her family is an important one on Vulcan, and to maintain her social position it was necessary for her to marry into a family of equal standing." As Spock talked he grew calm, and finally released his grip on Kirk's arm.

"Of course, in normal circumstances her parents would have arranged a marriage; however, without the ability to bond marriage was out of the question for her unless in exceptional circumstances. So logically she decided to engineer the circumstances. She came to this conference with the express purpose of becoming my wife."

"But she was a scientist with a reputation in her own right. Why couldn't she take pride in that?"

"Jim, you must understand that a mature, unmarried Vulcan is a rarity, even considered an oddity in some circles."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "Does that apply to you, too?"

"Vulcan males take a wife for reasons which are known to you. I am considered an oddity to a point, though my absence from Vulcan means that there is no-one to comment on the situation. In addition, I believe that some think that my Human genes may have saved me from the... necessity of taking a wife, though of course none would voice the opinion openly."

At that moment Kirk felt a strong sense of Spock's isolation, of his otherness, neither Human nor Vulcan. It was the first time that the Captain had truly understood his First Officer's position between two worlds. If T'Vedis had been an oddity, so was Spock, though he had found a life and a unique place of his own in the scheme of things. Kirk wondered if the affair with T'Vedis had shaken Spock's sureness about his life path as it had shaken Kirk's own confidence in his own motivations. He wanted to offer the Vulcan comfort, but did not know how.

"Spock, tell me what I can do to help."

Spock considered the Human's words. "I wish to take some leave. I cannot be precise about the length of time."

"Spock, anything you want. I'll make sure I'm there to collect you when you're ready, wherever you are."

"I will be here, Jim. I must contact T'Vedis' family. The truth of what has happened must not be told on the base here. There must be no enquiry; the shame would harm the family, and all Vulcan."

"Spock, that isn't logical."

"But it is the truth. I will stay here until all the arrangements are complete."

"Will you tell the family the whole story?"

"I must. It will be obvious how she died. She performed a ritual suicide. I do not wish anyone else except you and Dr McCoy to know the details."

"Then I must return to the ship and make explanations. The crew is due shore leave. I'll take the Enterprise to Rima as planned, then come back here for you. If you're not ready, I'll wait."

"Starfleet might not agree with you, Captain."

"Hang Starfleet. I'm coming back here."

As Jim Kirk uncurled himself from the floor Spock closed his eyes again. Kirk headed for the door, but turned as he reached it and studied the Vulcan for a moment.

"Spock, I don't want to leave you like this. I still need to know that you are all right."

The brown eyes opened once more. "I will spend time in meditation over the next days. This will restore my shields. I will come to terms with the events of recent days."

Spock watched a plethora of emotions chase one another across Kirk's face. The Human was not satisfied.

"Jim, why are you so deeply troubled?"

"I'm worried about you."

"There is more, I think."

"Yes, but it can wait. You've enough on your plate without adding my neuroses to it."

"Jim, be warned. When I have meditated I will put these events from my conscious mind. I will not willingly think of them again. If something troubles you, you must tell me now."

Hesitantly, Kirk returned to the centre of the room and seated himself.

"All this has shaken me, made me rethink my attitude to you. I'm not proud of my behaviour over the last couple of days. I tried to push you into deciding what I wanted you to do. I've been questioning my motives since. I was convinced that I was only considering your happiness, but I wonder now. McCoy questioned my motives, too; I think he sees clearer than I do. He could see that perhaps it would be better for you to take a wife, return to Vulcan, ensure your future... safety... and when... Well, you're longer-lived than us - you ought to be thinking about your long-term future. McCoy had to point that out. I hadn't thought of it until he did. I was just thinking of me - having you by my side, not wanting to lose you."

Kirk laughed shakily. "Even T'Vedis said that Human love is essentially selfish. I think she may well be right. Anyway, I believe I owe you an apology; I may have increased your pain..."

When Kirk tailed off Spock remained immobile, silent. Unsure of himself, suddenly uncomfortable in the alien Vulcan environment, Kirk rose and uncramped his leg.

"Well, for what it's worth, that's what's wrong. There's nothing you can do about it. I'd better get back..."

Spock's voice stopped Kirk in his tracks. "Foolish Human. Dost thee not yet know thyself? I understand thy caring if thee dost not. There is no grain of selfishness in thee. Come - I will show thee."

Spock motioned a startled Kirk to the ground. "If I may?"

The Vulcan's bony fingers assumed the meld position, and suddenly Jim Kirk could see his desperate fight on Spock's behalf from a different viewpoint.

//Like thee, Jim, I live for the immediate future. McCoy is right in his way, but it is not my way. If thee dost not wish that I should leave thee, then neither do I wish to go. If that is selfishness, then so be it. We satisfy a mutual need, one for the other. Thee hast great natural goodness and concern for others. I am honoured to call thee friend.//

The mind voice ceased, and for a few moments Spock allowed Jim Kirk to see the nature of his feelings for T'Vedis. The anger had died, to be replaced with sorrow over the waste of life and a determination to do what could be done to honour the woman's memory.

The meld was terminated gently, and Kirk drew back, a lump in his throat.

"So if she had lived, you would have stayed with her..."

"Not precisely, Jim. I would have sent her back to Vulcan with the protection of my name, but I would not have gone with her."

"You would have done this because you understood her isolation."

"Yes, I understand it. But I do not suffer any sense of isolation, as you believe I do. I am content in my chosen path."

Kirk sighed. "I suppose I really should go back to the Enterprise and sort out the crew's well-deserved shore leave." He rose and headed for the door. "Perhaps this time I'll make it outside. Spock..."

"Jim?"

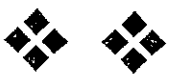
"Thank you."

The Vulcan did not reply, but instead rose to his feet. "I too must be about my business."

They left the holoroom side by side.

A SHIP'S ENGINEER

There was a ship's engineer, Scott,
Who often became overwrought.
"Ah think ah'll throw up,
'Cos ma bairns'll blow up,
Unless this Scot changes the plot!"



Gillian Fry

MONSTERS

by

David Cameron.

The old man's face wrinkled and split to reveal leathery skin and large orb-shaped eyes the size of tennis balls. The face was now insectoid, with nibbling mandibles. Long thin arms tipped with clicking pincers broke loose from the enclosing husk of the aged body and reached slowly, slowly out towards the blue-uniformed Starfleet officer who was staring at the hideous transformation in wide-eyed amazement and disgust, transfixed by the sight. As one of the pincers groped tentatively towards him he leapt backwards.

"Spock!" he yelled, backing away rapidly.

The thing approached closer, hissing. "What isss it, Doctor? Isss sssomething the matter? Perhapsss I can be of asssissstance."

"Oh my god, don't come any closer!" McCoy responded, drawing his phaser - but would even a phaser have any effect on this apparition?

"Doctor, what are you doing?" asked a familiar voice.

McCoy turned his head quickly, to see the Vulcan Science Officer striding briskly up the street with a drawn phaser.

"Why are you acting in a threatening manner towards that man?" Spock asked on reaching the Doctor.

"But Spock, you don't understand! It's horr-" He broke off as he snapped his gaze back to the monstrosity. Expecting to gaze into this globular insect eyes, he was shocked to see only the face of the frightened old man.

"But what...?" McCoy burst out. "I thought... No, this can't be..."

"What cannot be?" inquired Spock, as the old man hurried away down the street.

"I thought," McCoy faltered, hating what the Vulcan was going to think, "I thought I saw a monster."

"A monster, Doctor?" Spock's eyebrow rose. "I find that unlikely. I only observed you and the aged gentleman."

"Spock, your aged gentleman *was* the monster."

"Fascinating, Doctor. A most amusing joke, I am sure." With that Spock turned as though to walk away.

"No, dammit, Spock! This isn't a joke. It was real." He paused. "At least, I think it was."

Spock turned back. "Perhaps we should return to the ship," he said. "I believe that the Captain would be intrigued by an account of this occurrence."

McCoy eyed Spock suspiciously, but had to agree.

"A monster!" spluttered Jim Kirk, almost choking on his coffee. "Bones,

come off it!" Kirk was sitting behind his desk in his quarters, thankful to be off duty for a few hours before continuing with preparations for the Gorns' arrival.

McCoy was standing somewhat sheepish-faced before him, while Spock's eyebrow rose for what seemed to be the five-hundredth time that day. "Look, Jim," he said, "I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. I'll even submit myself to an examination by Chapel to prove it to you."

"Perhaps you should. Maybe you've been working too hard," replied Kirk, raising his hand to quell the outburst he knew was about to issue from his friend. "Besides, all Spock saw was the old man. How do you answer that?"

"I can't. But I *did* see that creature, I'm sure of it... I think."

"You think? Look, Bones, go and have a lie down or whatever and just - "

"Actually, Captain," Spock, who had been listening to the conversation intently, interrupted, "I do believe that the Doctor is telling the truth, at least to his knowledge. Since I am not currently required aboard ship, may I have your permission to begin an investigation?"

"Oh, all right." Kirk gave up and threw his hands in the air. "Maybe you'd better check it out. Oh, and Bones, you'd probably better help."

"Thanks, Jim. You won't regret it," said McCoy as he and Spock turned to leave Kirk's quarters.

"First white rabbits and now this," Kirk said to himself once they had left. "Whatever next?"

. . . . . .

Captain's Log, Stardate 3120.6

We are currently orbiting Terris III, the meeting place for the preliminary negotiations between the Federation and the Gorn Alliance. Both the Gorn and Federation Ambassadors have yet to arrive, but we are anticipating the arrival of the Tellarite G'dundar, the Federation representative, at 09.00 hours tomorrow morning.

My First Officer and Chief Medical Officer are meanwhile continuing their investigations into Dr McCoy's so-called monster. However, I am unconcerned that this will affect the coming negotiations in any way.

"Okay, so if I'm tellin' the truth, how come you didn't see that thing as well?" asked McCoy as he and Spock walked back towards the scene of the Doctor's encounter. The sun was beginning to set as they neared the appropriate street.

"I have insufficient data to formulate an accurate theory at this time," replied Spock, "but since you and only you witnessed this event, it could lead to the conclusion that you were hallucinating, Doctor."

"Look, Spock, I'm fairly sure that I wasn't hallucinating, but if I was we're gonna have to find out what caused it."

"Therefore we shall examine this area," Spock concluded as they reached the street. Both men raised their tricorders and began to scan the empty street.

"Hmmm, atmosphere normal, pollution within acceptable limits,"

McCoy muttered to himself. "But... hey, what's this?"

"Are you reading it too, Doctor?" Spock asked. "Traces of a chemical agent, presumably airborne, in this area."

"Yeah, I'm reading it," replied McCoy, "but I don't know what it it - we'll need to compare the tricorder readings with the library record tapes on the Enterprise to see if we can get a match."

"Agreed," said Spock. "Let us return there immediately."

A short period of time later the two were back aboard ship and had found an identity for the chemical - Ditroxia, a mild hallucinogenic drug from the Orion colonies. The tricorder readings also showed that the Ditroxia traces in the street were an unusually strong concentration.

"Well, that appears to answer the question of whether or not I was hallucinating," said McCoy, looking up from the library computer.

"It would appear so," Spock replied, "but I would be interested in knowing just how the Ditroxia got there - and why."

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott was mildly inebriated and proud of it. This was his last chance for a 'wee drink' before those nasty reptilian beasties, the Gorn, got here, after all.

"Ah think Ah've had enough," Scotty announced generally to the patrons of the Terrisian drinking establishment, who included young Ensign Pavel Chekov.

"Wery well, sair," Chekov replied, his eyes on the barmaid who was serving drinks, "but I think I'll stay a little longer."

Scotty glanced in Chekov's direction. "Aye - well, be good, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Of course not, sair," Chekov replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Having said his farewells Scotty stumbled out of the bar and headed back to his beam-down coordinates. He was just about to contact the ship when out of the corner of his eye he noticed someone looking directly at him. Slowly and deliberately, Scotty pretended to drop something, knelt down to retrieve the item, then glanced back to look at the figure.

It hurried to conceal itself, but before it did Scotty got a good look at it. The figure was male, of medium height, bearded, and with a dark complexion. Unmistakably a Klingon!

Scott grabbed his communicator, and was just about to flip it open when he saw other little figures coming towards him out of the darkness. They were about a metre tall, red skinned, with gnashing teeth and wearing red caps. Each carried a large rock.

Scott stood stock still. "It canna be," he stammered. "It canna be Red Caps."

The dwarfish figures raised the rocks. Scott fumbled for his phaser, recalled it was on the Enterprise, and turned to run. The rocks came down. Scott fell. From out of the darkness issued a short, evil laugh.

"He's comin' round now, Jim," McCoy reported as he stood over Scott in Sickbay.

Kirk turned to look at Chekov. "Let me get this straight," he said. "The two of you spent the evening in the bar. Scotty left early, and you found him in a dead faint later on."

"That's right, sair," a concerned Chekov replied. "He seemed okay physically, but I thought Dr McCoy had better check him over."

Scott's eyes opened and he looked from McCoy to Chekov to Kirk. "Sir, you're not going to believe this, but I saw a Klingon down there, and he had a whole host of Red Caps with him. Mighty tricky wee devils they were, too. We've got to stop them. They're up to no good, I know that for sure."

"Scotty," Kirk replied, concern mixed with disbelief, "we're light years from the Klingon border, and as for these other things... what were they - Red Caps?"

"Aye, sir, like those in the Scottish legends."

"Scottish legends! Come on, Scotty!"

"Actually, Jim, these wouldn't be the first monsters we've seen here," McCoy cut in. "It seems I'm not the only one who's hallucinating about ghosts and goblins. I'd like to check and see if they're all being caused by the same thing."

"I'd be might grateful if you did," Scott said.

"Well, okay," Kirk agreed as the wall communicator beeped.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," Uhura's voice said.

"Kirk here."

"Sir, Ambassador G'Dundar's ship has just arrived; he's preparing to beam over to the Enterprise."

"Acknowledged. Any news on the Gorn ship?"

"Yes, sir. It will arrive within the hour."

"Very well. Kirk out." He turned off the wall communicator and sighed. Meetings with Tellarites were not something he cherished. *Better bring some moral support, he thought.* "Bones, Chekov, let's go meet the Ambassador. Feel up to it, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. I have a mighty fine constitution."

Kirk smiled. "Okay, let's go, then," he said, heading for the transporter room.

Spock was already there when they arrived. Seeing them, he ordered, "Energise, Mr Kyle."

"Aye, sir," the English Transporter Chief acknowledged before setting the transporter into operation.

Soon four short, stocky figures with hairy features and pig-like faces materialised. The Tellarites had arrived.

"Greetings, Kirk. I am Ambassador G'dundar," the leading Tellarite proclaimed, "and these are my aides, Jikar, Keeran and Gart. We will be taken to our quarters now." It was an order, not a request.

"Yes, of course, sir," Kirk, who had been about to introduce his officers, replied. "Mr Chekov, escort the Ambassador and his entourage to their quarters."

"If you will follow me, sairs..."

Chekov began, setting off for the door.

"You expect us to follow a mere *ensign*?" Gart burst out. "Have you no respect for the Ambassador?"

Chekov turned back, his ears flaming red.

"I apologise, Mr Ambassador," Kirk interceded quickly. "Please permit me to escort you."

"That will be adequate," G'dundar growled, and followed Kirk out of the transporter room.

As the doors slid shut behind the Tellarites Scott, McCoy and Chekov all issued sighs of great relief.

"If you have quite finished, gentlemen," Spock interrupted, "I believe that you, Mr Scott, and you, Dr McCoy, should accompany me to the main laboratory where we will seek to confirm the hallucinatory effect of the Ditroxia. Mr Chekov, you may return to the Bridge."

"Aye, sair," Chekov replied as they all headed for the turbolift.

Jim Kirk practically collapsed into the recently vacated turbolift after escorting the Tellarites to their quarters. Niggle, niggle, niggle - that was all they could seem to do, especially regarding the Enterprise. Gart had taken an immediate dislike to his quarters in particular and the interior ship design in general, especially in regard to the gravity.

Kirk had sought to soothe the complaints by having the gravity in the Tellarites' quarters raised, but as for raising it for the entire ship, he had informed Gart that it was quite impossible, displeasing the aide considerably. G'dundar wasn't quite as bad, but he was still impatient and arrogant; still, he wasn't quite as scathing about the Enterprise as the bad-tempered Gart...

"Bridge," Kirk said tiredly. *Now all I've got to do is open friendly channels with a race who devastated a colony,* he told himself as the lift ascended. The memory of Cestus III was still bitter in his mind, but as he had promised the Metron, both the Gorn and the Federation would have to come to an arrangement if they were to coexist peacefully.

The lift doors slid open to reveal the Bridge. On the viewscreen was the image of a squat, cuboid vessel with engine nacelles which had the appearance of little more than elongated rectangles. Functional, was the most widely favoured word used to describe the Gorn technology, and that word seemed best to sum up the ship on the screen.

Kirk stepped out of the turbolift and headed for the command chair. *Push 'till it moves,* he thought as he regarded the vessel on the screen.

"Sir, I'm receiving a transmission from the Gorn ship," Uhura reported.

"On audio, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered.

"This is the Gorn Alliance Vessel Haradrach," a harsh voice grated through the Universal Translator. "We are preparing to beam down to Terris III and require details of our meeting place."

Short and sweet, Kirk thought. *Maybe I underestimated the Gorn.* "This is the USS Enterprise," he replied. "Our representatives will meet you at these coordinates..."

"Ah hope you know what you're doing, Mr Spock," said a worried Montgomery Scott.

He was sitting in a test chamber in the Enterprise's main laboratory. Both McCoy and Spock were outside in the lab itself; Spock was working at the test chamber's atmospheric controls, while McCoy assisted as best he could.

"There is no cause for concern, Mr Scott," Spock assured him without looking up. "We are merely going to introduce Ditroxia into the test chamber's atmosphere in an attempt to confirm its hallucinogenic properties as regards these 'monsters'."

"Aye, but how do you know I was exposed to the same stuff as Dr McCoy?" Scott asked, still concerned.

"Simple, Mr Scott. Mr Chekov took a tricorder reading of the area where he found you."

"That was very clever of him."

"Not at all. It is what I would have expected of him."

"In other words, you expect everyone to be as thorough as you are," McCoy accused. "I bet you didn't even thank him."

"I congratulated him on following a commendable procedure," Spock replied.

"I don't believe it!" McCoy exclaimed. "You actually thanked him! This is a historic occasion."

"The atmosphere is ready - we can begin the experiment," Spock said, dropping out of the conversation.

McCoy grinned before starting the test, then he began to introduce Ditroxia into the test chamber's atmosphere.

"Remember, Mr Scott," said Spock, ignoring the Doctor's grin, "you must tell us exactly what you see when you see it."

"Aye, sure, Mr Spock," Scott replied, "but I don't think I'll... My god, what is *that*?"

"What is it, Scotty? What can you see?" McCoy asked quickly.

"It canna be..."

"What is it, Mr Scott?" Spock asked firmly.

"It's like one of yon beasties we saw on Deneva, except it's huge... Oh no - it's coming closer!"

"I'm getting him out of there," McCoy stated, dashing to open the chamber door.

Spock responded by reducing the concentration of Ditroxia in the chamber.

McCoy threw open the door and ran to Scott, whose face was covered in sweat. "Scotty, are you all right?"

"Aye, I think so," Scott replied, his eyes wild. "It's gone now."

"Has it, indeed?" inquired Spock. Then it would appear that the experiment was a success."

"Yeah, a success at scaring Scotty out of his wits," snapped McCoy.

"Really, Doctor? That may be so. However, we have also proved that the Ditroxia was responsible for your respective monsters, but if you have any doubts I am sure that Mr Scott would be quite willing to allow you to test this theory in the chamber yourself."

"Uh, no thanks, Spock," McCoy said, but before he could go any further Scott burst out,

"That Klingon devil - I'll bet it was him! He was no hallucination, I'm sure o' that."

"Hmm," Spock pondered, "Perhaps so, but in the meantime I recommend we return to the Bridge to watch the development of the negotiations. They may be of great importance."

"I'd hate to miss out on such an important event," McCoy said sarcastically, "so I suppose we'd better go watch."

Several minutes later the three had joined the rest of the department heads on the Bridge. All were watching the viewscreen intently.

It showed a bland council room with a circular table, and a window looking out onto the city below. In addition to the four Tellarites, there were also four Gorn in the room. Each was dressed in the same fabric the first Gorn Captain Kirk had encountered had worn. One also wore a circlet of silver, to denote that he was the leader.

In order to allay fears for security on both sides, a transmission of the talks was transmitted to the viewscreens of both the Haradrach and the Enterprise. It was this transmission that the Bridge crew were now watching.

"So once again you wish to claim Cestus III as your own," the Gorn leader was rasping through his Universal Translator, "even though it is clearly ours."

"I did *not* say that the Federation wanted Cestus III," G'dundar replied, exasperated. "I proposed that the Federation and the Gorn Alliance should try and develop the planet together, to allow us to come to terms with one another."

"Terms, ha!" spat one of the Gorn. "You wish only to... to... By the Great One, *what is that*?" The Gorn sprang up and reached for his cumbersome blaster.

"Federation traitors!" shouted the Gorn leader, throwing himself backwards off his seat. "How could you bring that winged horror here?"

Kirk swung round in his chair. he could see nothing on the screen except the eight diplomats. "Spock, what the hell's going on?" he asked, turning to his Science Officer.

"Unknown, Captain," Spock replied, gazing intently into his terminal, "but I intend to find out."

The Tellarites, meanwhile, were backing away from the Gorn. Smoke filled the room - one of the Gorn had fired his weapon - and the representatives were beginning to lose sight of one another in it.

"No!" G'dundar was crying. "Not the Valkear dragon! No - how could it be here?"

"It is obvious that you intended to kill us from the start," one of the Gorn accused the Tellarites as he stumbled through the smoke. He caught sight of G'dundar making for the door, aimed his blaster at the Ambassador's retreating back, and prepared to fire.

"Transporter room, get the Tellarites out of there!" Kirk ordered, realising the devastation that was about to occur behind the cloud of smoke.

"Aye, sir," Kyle replied over the intercom. "Energising."

The Gorn fired. The blaster bolt lanced through G'dundar's previous position and crashed into the wall, exposing a pipe and throwing rubble across the room.

"Enough of this!" ordered the Gorn leader. "We wil return to our ship and destroy the treacherous Federation vessel!"

"Captain," said Spock, "I am reading one alien life form within the council building."

"Species?" asked Kirk.

"Klingon."

"Klingon? Scotty, Bones, form a landing party. I believe the pleasure should be yours."

"Aye, sir!" Scott replied, dashing into the turbolift. "Come on, Doctor!"

"Yeah!" agreed McCoy, rushing after him.

They had barely left the Bridge when Spock said, "Sir, Gorn vessel powering up weapons. I project it will attack on intercept course one mark six one."

"All right," sighed Kirk. "Lieutenant Uhura, contact the transporter room and find out if Dr McCoy and Mr Scott have beamed down, then get a line to the Gorn ship. Mr Chekov, prepare to raise shields. Mr Sulu, ready phasers."

Scott and McCoy barged through the shaken Tellarites and beamed down just before the shields went up. The circular council room they materialised in was a shambles, containing a shattered table and chairs. The smoke was beginning to escape through a huge hole in the window, but a haze still lay over the chamber.

"Look, Doctor," said Scott, indicating the severed pipe protruding from the wall.

"I'd be willing to bet that's our Ditroxia introducer," McCoy replied, raising his tricorder.

"Aye, but where's our Klingon?" asked Scott, heading for the door and throwing it open.

A hard fist caught him square on the jaw and he collapsed, stunned. McCoy swung round, phaser at the ready.

"So, Doctor," said the Klingon, stepping into the room and aiming his disruptor, "you were my first victim, and now you will be my last."

The two adversaries fired simultaneously. McCoy's phaser beam caught the Klingon in the chest, but the Klingon's aim was almost as good - his disruptor bolt hit McCoy in the arm, causing the Doctor to cry out in pain and drop his phaser. The Klingon, despite being hit by a phaser on stun force, was still standing, however, and still possessed his disruptor. He prepared to fire the killing bolt...

Suddenly the Klingon went down in a tangle of Scottish arms and legs. He did not get up.

"Aye, that'll show you," said a bruised Scott. "Think ye can still stand after a phaser set on stun - well, ye're *wrong*!"

Despite his pain, McCoy couldn't

help grinning.

The Gorn vessel had moved into attack position and was about to open fire on the Enterprise when Scott contacted the ship.

"Sir!" he exclaimed. "We've got the Klingon dog responsible - ye've got to tell the Gorn!"

"Easier said than done, Mr Scott," Kirk responded, "but we'll try."

"I have a channel open, sir," Uhura reported.

"Gorn vessel Haradrach," Kirk began, "this is James T Kirk of the USS Enterprise. We know who was responsible for the incident in the council room. It was a Klingon agent. I therefore urge you not to fire until we have established his guilt. As a show of good faith we will lower our shields. Lower shields, Mr Chekov."

"Aye, sair," Chekov said dejectedly.

There was a very long pause.

"I think I can hear the wheels in the Gorns' heads turning," Sulu joked nervously.

Then the communication system returned to life. "This is the Haradrach," said the same harsh voice. "For the present, we accept your proposal."

"Very well. Please meet us in the council room in ten minutes."

"So this *creature*," growled the Gorn leader, grabbing the Klingon by the throat with one very large hand while indicating the exposed pipe with the other, "caused us to see creatures from our minds?"

"That's right," said McCoy, nursing his arm but looking remarkably satisfied. "He's a Klingon agent named Korgan. He believed he could disrupt the negotiations and possibly cause an interstellar incident, if not war."

"Which could only harm the Gorn and the Federation, but benefit the Klingon Empire," put in Kirk.

"His one mistake was to test his equipment on Dr McCoy and Mr Scott," said Spock.

"Aye, that's the one thing I don't understand," a confused Scott admitted. "Why did you bother wasting time with us?"

"It's quite simple, Human," Korgan growled, struggling to break free from the Gorn leader's vice-like grip. "You and your ship have dishonoured the Klingons in almost every encounter. I took the chance for revenge."

"And a most petty revenge it was, too," Spock observed.

"As most revenge usually is," concluded Kirk. "Better luck next time. Well, sir," he said, turning to the Gorn, who had just released Korgan. "I hope you are satisfied, and are willing to continue with the talks?"

"Yes, Kirk, I believe we will," the Gorn leader replied. "Certainly it would further frustrate the schemes of this *thing*."

The Klingon spat.

"Very well." Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Have Ambassador G'dundar and his

entourage beam down. I believe they have some unfinished business. And this time," he added, turning to look at McCoy, his eyes twinkling, "it won't involve any monsters. Kirk out."

40 ERIDANI

Interstellar transmogrification,
An alien language with no translation.

A burning hot planet to instil you with fears,
Superhuman strength and strange pointed ears,
Mean harsh mouth, dark narrow eyes,
The greatest of people the exterior lies.

Spilling blood, slashing claws,
Impulse reaction - this means war!
Poisonous beast, a bloody fight,
Stomachs churn at the gory sight.

Unthinking tribes with an urge to kill,
From animal flesh they eat their fill.
Credit means nothing, water is precious,
It keeps you alive, it tastes delicious.

Some tribes band together to beat their way back.
The bringer of logic is named Surak.
Surak becomes a Vulcan Messiah,
But still seven years brings a madness fire.

Masters of Gol could kill with a thought,
After Surak total logic is sought.
Pulses and vegetables are used for food,
Animals now not killed or abused.

Hot desert is no longer their home,
They have built structures made from stone.
Tribes leave the planet, destination unclear;
They will not be seen for many a year.

M. Sadler

"SPACE FALL"

A STAR TREK STORY

by Matthew Conway

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This adventure takes place between the first-season Star Trek episodes "A Taste of Armageddon" and "This Side of Paradise", some time after the events chronicled in "Space Seed".

I

Captain's log, stardate 3194.1. The Enterprise has encountered a vessel, origin unknown, drifting powerless in this star system. Our hails have been met with silence, and sensors are unable to detect any life signs. I am preparing to beam aboard the ship with Mister Spock and Doctor McCoy in the hope of unravelling some of the mystery surrounding this inter-stellar Mary Celeste.

The three Starfleet officers materialised in a large chamber dimly lit by luminescent panels set in a high ceiling. Captain James T. Kirk took a brief look around to reassure himself that the landing party was in no immediate danger, checked the presence of his two companions, then removed his communicator from his belt.

"Kirk to Enterprise," he said, flipping open the device's receiving grill to be greeted by the familiar chirrup.

"Scott here, Captain," replied the Chief Engineer's voice over the subspace channel.

"We've arrived safely, Scotty, so full marks again for your handling of the transporter. We'll proceed on to the bridge - or whatever this ship's got in place of a bridge - and contact you when we get there."

"Aye, sir. Enterprise out."

Kirk reattached the communicator to his belt, noticing a familiar expression on the face of his First Officer as he did so.

"Found something fascinating, Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan raised a reproachful eyebrow at his commanding officer's ribaldry, but refused to rise any further to the bait.

"I believe so, Captain," he replied simply, walking toward one of the chamber's walls with his tricorder at maximum scan. "It would appear that much of this vessel's superstructure is composed of monocrystal beryllium silicate, a substance that Starfleet has only recently begun to research for the construction of its starships."

"Mono what, Spock?" interrupted Dr Leonard McCoy in the most sarcastic voice that he could affect. "We don't all speak fluent technobabble, so how about a little translation for the mere mortals among us?"

"Monocrystal beryllium silicate," explained Spock slowly, again refusing the bait offered this time by the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer, "is a stable, durable, unreactive compound

under considerable scrutiny from Starfleet scientists because of its ability to tolerate the stresses created during warp-speed travel. Indeed, Doctor, as a fellow scientist, I am surprised that you are not familiar with its applications."

"I'm a doctor, not a schizophrenic," snapped McCoy at this barb. "If I kept track of Starfleet construction techniques as well as medicine, I wouldn't know whether I was coming or going. Of course," he added only half humorously, "I've suspected you of that for some time now."

As the exchange between his two closest friends threatened to degenerate into one of the pitched battles that had begun to gain legendary status among the Enterprise's crew, Kirk raised a conciliatory hand for silence.

"Thank you for your respective opinions, gentlemen," he said, the sparkle in his eyes belying the hard edge of his voice. "However, I believe we have a job to do, and we're not likely to get it done by standing here arguing."

Both Spock and McCoy acquiesced at their commanding officer's intervention, but both were noticeably stiff-necked as they accompanied Kirk through the door to the chamber, much to his silent amusement.

Nevertheless, amusement soon gave way to curiosity as they followed passageway after passageway in the bowels of the unknown ship. Its design - three forward-pointing modules protecting a spherical command section of some description - was not only unrecognisable to the Enterprise's library computer but was also quite unlike any other vessel configuration that it could identify. It had certainly not originated within the Federation, and the probability of its heralding from either Klingon or Romulan space diminished with every step that the Starfleet officers took surrounded by technology many years more advanced than their own.

When they stepped out of a final corridor and onto what could only be the starship's bridge, Kirk could have sworn that Spock's reaction to the sight almost bordered upon an emotional revelation. For himself, he whistled aloud and tried to comprehend how such a design could have found its way, apparently abandoned, into Federation space without being detected by anyone else. It was just another mystery to add to all the others.

The bridge itself was quite unlike that of the Enterprise. Banks of seats - two in each, positioned side by side in three rows - provided access to a range of stations whose functions were anything but discernible at first glance. A crescent of more comfortable chairs occupied part of the floor beyond these, while a large hexagonal screen occupied the wall at the far end of the room, a pattern of flashing lights playing across its brown surface. The white metallic walls and bright lighting added to an overall effect of stark utility tempered by an attention to comfort that Kirk found somewhat incongruous.

"Spock?" he asked at last.

"Most interesting, Captain," replied the First Officer, his attention focused again upon the read-outs offered by his tricorder. "I am detecting an enormous power source emanating from this chamber and yet radiating no further, hence its lack of detection by the Enterprise's sensors. It would appear to be coming from that structure over there."

Kirk followed the Vulcan's gesture and found himself facing the hexagonal screen of flashing lights. Slowly

descending a series of steps that led into the main body of the bridge, he stepped up to the centre of Spock's attention, his experience telling him to expect something to happen.

It did.

"Identify yourselves," announced a hollow voice from a point somewhere above his head.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise," replied Kirk, wondering exactly to whom - or to what - he was speaking, and why it had spoken in English. "Who are you?"

"You are unauthorised intruders," continued the voice, ignoring his question. "Zen must be protected."

"Who's Zen when he's at home?" asked McCoy.

"Zen must be protected," repeated the voice. "You are unauthorised intruders."

A sudden, blinding pain filled Kirk's head, wrenching an involuntary gasp from his lips. As he spun around, he saw Spock and McCoy reacting similarly, before each slowly sank to the ground, unconsciousness. Kirk fought against the blackness that crept slowly across his mind, but he also lost the battle. As he collapsed to the floor, his last thought was of how exactly Zen had decided to protect himself before that, too, disappeared into the gulf of nothingness.

II

"You're madly in love with Helen, Captain. You'd lie, cheat, steal for her, sacrifice your career, your reputation. The pain - can you feel it, Captain? You must have her or the pain grows worse, the pain, the longing for her. For years you've loved her, Captain, for years. You must continue to remember that, Captain."

Something was wrong. As Kirk sat in the chair in the treatment room and stared upward at the neural neutraliser affixed to the ceiling directly above his head, he instinctively felt that something was wrong. Even though the device's hypnotic pulsing prevented him from looking away, he knew that Doctor Tristan Adams, director of the Tantalus Penal Colony, was standing at a control panel just a few metres to his right and subjecting him to the assault that threatened to break down every mental barrier that he could erect. His love for Doctor Helen Noel was so powerful that it was as if the need had consumed his soul for years, yet the suggestion had been planted in his mind no more than a couple of minutes previously.

However, it was not the situation itself that caused his every fibre to cry foul. Rather, it was a nagging doubt that he did not belong there, or, at the very least, that he should not be there at that moment in time. Nevertheless, the feeling of deja vu, if deja vu it truly were, was unlike any that he had ever experienced before, seemingly far more real and insistent. The part of his consciousness still under his control could not rid itself of the growing suspicion that he really had been subjected to this unique and exquisite form of torture at some time in the past, nor would it cease contemplating the very likely possibility that its effects upon Kirk could be disastrous.

Unfortunately, there seemed little that he could do under the circumstances to alleviate matters, and, all the while, his longing and loneliness simply became ever more unbearable.

"And now she's gone."

All of a sudden, the reason for Kirk's preternatural discomfiture became evident, and he realised that he had been right: he was not experiencing an unusually powerful feeling of deja vu for the simple fact that he had been here before, had sat in this chair before, and had been assailed by the neural neutraliser under Adams' control before. The events of just a few short weeks ago - Doctor Simon van Gelder's escape to the Enterprise, Kirk's visit to the Tantalus Penal Colony, and Adams' eventual death at the hands of his own torture device - were now as clear to him as a mountain spring, as was the fact that he, Spock, and McCoy had been aboard a mysterious alien vessel just before this - whatever this was - had started.

However, what he did not know was how and why he had suddenly been placed in this situation again, if indeed he was really there at all. He could not dismiss the physical sensations of his surroundings - the sounds, the sights, the press of the treatment chair against his body, and especially his overwhelming loneliness at the knowledge that Helen was not with him - but, at the same time, the part of his reasoning over which he still had absolute control flatly rejected the notion that he was back on Tantalus. More likely, he realised as his confused thoughts finally began to reorganise themselves, was that he was being forced to relive this experience in his mind, and that Adams and the neural neutraliser were merely figments of his imagination.

Unfortunately, he also had to concede the fact that unless he were somehow able to break the chain of events that were due to unfold, the consequences could prove to be very unpleasant indeed.

Through a renewed stab of pain, Kirk got out his communicator and snapped it open. "Captain... to Enterprise," he said. He found it very difficult to speak; the message did not seem to be important.

Kirk had not wanted to contact the Enterprise the first time that he had been rendered powerless by Adams, and he had certainly had no intention of doing so on this occasion either. However, whether because of the effects of the neutral neutraliser - which, even if only a creation of his imagination, continued to exert an unbreakable hold upon him - or due to the unknown force that was forcing him to relive this unsavoury chapter of his life, he had found himself unable to prevent the words issuing from his lips. Worse yet, although he had not willingly hailed the Enterprise, he knew that those aboard the vessel would hear nothing untoward that might raise any suspicions about the safety of either himself or Doctor Noel. For that reason, it was doubly frustrating.

Nevertheless, despite his inability thus far to alter the events that were taking place around him, Kirk was able to draw at least some hope from the situation. With every passing second, he felt more and more in control of his consciousness - at least, as much of his consciousness as the neural neutraliser would allow. The loneliness and the longing for Helen were still almost overwhelming, but he finally felt able to begin to rail against his assailants.

The only question that remained to be answered was whether or not his efforts would be enough to escape from both Doctor Tristan Adams and the unknown cause of his dangerous hallucinations.

"Enterprise here, Captain," Spock's voice said.

Although Kirk had already doubled his efforts to escape his mental prison, the sound of Spock's voice caused him to redouble them again. The Enterprise's new Captain and its long-serving First Officer had served together for less than six months, but a bond had already been forged between the two that transcended mere Starfleet loyalty, a bond of friendship upon which Kirk would - and, indeed, on several occasions, had - willingly risk his life. It was the knowledge that the Vulcan was in command of his ship that filled Kirk with new vigour, for all he had to do to register his plight was to somehow communicate that all was not well, that all was, in fact, horribly awry.

Such communication was easier thought that done, however, as Kirk discovered when he mustered all of his concentration to try to break free of both the neural neutraliser and the time loop in which he had been trapped. Which of the two thwarted his efforts the more - or maybe it was a combination wrought by the force that had imprisoned him within his mind - he did not know, but he found himself completely unable to so much as blink an eyelid unless, it appeared, he had blinked that eyelid during his true visit to Tantalus. It was a sensation much like being totally paralysed, but the helplessness of his situation so enraged Kirk that he almost feared the consequences for those around him if he should finally break free.

And break free he certainly would, or his name was not James T. Kirk.

"All is well, Mr Spock. I'm still with Dr Adams."

In complete contrast to the words that he had involuntarily spoken into the communicator, all was not well as far as Kirk was concerned, the sole reason being that he still was with Dr Adams when he would have preferred the company of even Dr Roger Korby and his android, Ruk. At least the latter's motivation, misguided though it was, was the supposed improvement of the Human race instead of the senseless suffering caused, and seemingly enjoyed, by Adams. Further, Korby had been fallible, his duplicate of the Enterprise's Captain easily instilled with a reaction - "Mind your own business, Mr Spock. I'm sick of your half-breed interference, do you hear?" - that had brought an end to the archaeologist's dream of replacing key Federation personnel with computerised doppelgangers.

Adams, on the other hand, was not so much insane as psychopathic, conducting his reign of terror so carefully that it might never have been detected but for the concerted actions of Kirk and Helen. However, there was no Helen to help Kirk this time, no one who could rescue him from the nightmare that had resurrected Adams in his mind. If there was a means of escape, only Kirk himself could achieve it, failing which he had no doubt that the consequences would be far worse than mere desire for a Starfleet psychologist.

He could do it. He would do it. He was growing stronger with every second. Soon, he would be able to pit that strength against his mental prison, to try to break free from his dreams and return to reality. Not yet, but soon.

"You sound tired, Captain. No problems?"

Kirk did not expect any fate other than death to await him if he simply went along with the events unfolding within his mind, and that certainly qualified as a problem as far as he was concerned. However, as he heard Spock's voice, he resigned himself to enduring the next few moments without trying to break free of

the situation. It was not, after all, Spock whom he was hearing but rather a playback of the past that would no more help him out of his predicament than would Adams' spectre. Further, he doubted that he had yet regained enough energy to make any escape attempt a worthwhile one; the effort would only exhaust him, leave him trapped in this tortuous time loop, and, if he accurately remembered what had next happened to him when he had really been imprisoned on Tantalus, deprive him of the one chance that would offer itself to him.

Instead, Kirk let Spock's words wash over his mind like quicksilver, taking advantage of the temporary respite from the worst of the neural neutraliser's effects. The longing for Helen remained, as did the compulsion to follow whatever orders were given to him by Adams, but he found himself more and more able to ignore those imperatives and concentrate instead on the one - survival - that was uppermost in his thoughts. It was still difficult, but no longer more so than other obstacles that Kirk had faced, and overcome, during his years with Starfleet.

Therefore, he bided his time, allowing his resolve to strengthen still further. It would not be long now before the decisive moment when he would have to act or fail in trying, and Kirk certainly had no intention of failing. That, at the very least, would never be a problem.

"None at all, Mr Spock. My next call will be in six hours. Kirk out."

Still loath to risk all when he could still feel himself growing stronger second by second, Kirk allowed his thoughts to wander further afield, a sign in itself that he was now better able to withstand the effects of the neural neutraliser. Its insidious influence was a constant danger against which he remained permanently on his guard, but the compulsion to obey Adams' orders had waned to the stage where he was almost tempted to stage his attempted breakout to reality, and his contrived infatuation with Dr Noel was now little more than the affectionate impulse that he had felt for more women than was probably his natural lot.

Instead, he recalled other no-win situations that he had faced and overcome, just as he had defeated the Kobyashi Maru test as a Starfleet cadet. His comparatively brief command of the Enterprise had already seen him defeat a best friend turned quasi-god, an adolescent possessed of the power to do almost anything he pleased, a deadly virus that had almost cost him the vessel of which it had inspired an overwhelming need, and a handful of other dangers that would have claimed most mortals a dozen times over. However, he had survived them to be where he was at the present, and if the past was any indication of his ability to extricate himself from tight situations, he had, at the very least, a fighting chance this time as well.

After all, million-to-one chances had a habit of succeeding for Kirk every other day. He had always been around afterward to argue the illogicality of it all with Spock, and he certainly had no intention of breaking that habit now.

He started to pocket the communicator, but Adams held out his hand.

He knew that Adams would demand to take the communicator away from him; even were he not able to remember the same event taking place previously, it would hardly have been wise to leave the Captain with a means of contacting his ship, security field or no security field. He also knew that he had been unable to resist the demand

previously, that he had handed over the communicator as willingly as if it had been a voluntary action.

Resisting that demand now, where he had failed in the past, would be Kirk's route to freedom. He could not explain why he knew this, too, to be true, but he was in no doubt that it was. Earlier, he had lacked the ability to make more than a token effort at freeing himself; to leave the attempt any later would be to risk allowing the opportunity to slip through his fingers, beyond reach if no other should present itself. It was a simple case of now or never.

Summoning his new-found strength, Kirk willed himself to keep hold of the communicator, concentrating his entire being on that so-simple act as if his very life depended on it. The fact that it did only served to increase his determination to fight back with everything that he had, resolute in the knowledge that there was certain to be no second chance if he were unable to break free. He and death had been sparring partners so often that he had come to recognise it no matter how it might appear, and death now loomed so near that he felt that it could almost touch him.

And that touch would be the last thing that he ever felt.

"And that, too, Captain."

Although Kirk believed that he had no alternative but to attempt to break free of his mental confinement at that precise moment, and despite the fact that he felt himself as ready as he ever would be to make that attempt, Adams' four words struck him like a photon torpedo at point-blank range. If he had retained any semblance of control over his body, he would probably have had his breath ripped away from him, such was the physical force of the command. As it was, waves of nausea swept across his whole being as he tried desperately to disobey the command.

Almost immediately, Kirk was fighting a losing battle. Even as he steeled himself to hold his own in the storm that threatened to rip him apart, he could feel the muscles in his hand relaxing to drop the communicator to the floor. It was an agonising process, and he was aware of the tiniest movement toward the relinquishing of the device and the inexorable breaking of his will.

However, just when he felt that he could not possibly delay the inevitable any longer, he found some hidden reserve deep within himself, a final stubborn vestige that refused to give up no matter what the circumstances. Slowly, ever so slowly, he felt his hand agonisingly clench again, clutching the communicator tight within its grasp. Nevertheless, the question remained: would it be enough?

Kirk hesitated. Adams reached for the control panel. The pain came back, redoubled, tripled, quadrupled; and now, at last, there came a real and blessed unconsciousness.

Even in the blackness, Kirk's struggle continued without let or hindrance as his mind fought to prevent unconsciousness giving way to a far more permanent condition from which there could be no return. The tide of the battle ebbed and flowed first one way and then the other as the Captain's will and its unseen assailant clamoured for ascendancy and victory, all the while manifesting itself as warped and distorted images of the Enterprise, the alien vessel that it had encountered, and the treatment room on Tantalus V where the neural neutraliser had been located. Unnatural angles and crazed lighting made even the most familiar scene alien and unwelcoming, almost depriving Kirk of

the hold on reality that he so desperately needed.

However, no matter how it appeared to him, the Enterprise was Kirk's home, his life, and, if he cared to admit it, his love. Seeing the malformed representations of her bridge, her engine room, and her gleaming metal hull simply made him all the more determined that he would not be parted from her so long as a single breath stirred within his chest. Renewed energy flooded his being, pushing back the tide that had almost engulfed him moments earlier, dissipating the blows that had all but broken down his last mental barriers, scattering the force that had tried to destroy him with his own mind.

Blackness once more swept across him, but this truly was the blackness of heavenly unconsciousness, sweet to the senses as the tension drained from his body and relinquished him to blessed nothingness.

III

Kirk's eyes snapped open to reveal the bridge of the alien starship, although it was several seconds before he realised that he was lying face down on the floor, his tunic damp with sweat and his head throbbing more painfully than he could remember in a very long time. When he also realised that he was still alive, however, any complaints that he might have had about the headache were immediately forgotten. More than that, though, he felt a sudden surge of anger at having to experience such a close shave with death, an anger that rapidly recalled the source of the attack to his clearing senses: Zen.

Pulling himself unsteadily to his feet, he caught sight of two more figures lying prone on the starship's metallic floor. Judging by the tortured expressions that spasmed uncontrollably across their faces, they were undergoing similar ordeals to his own.

"Spock! Bones!" shouted Kirk, shaking each of his officers in turn as hard as he could. For a dreadful moment, he feared that his actions had made no difference, but he was soon relieved to see the convulsions subside, weary eyes open, and scowls and raised eyebrows appear on confused visages.

"Fascinating," commented the First Officer in typical understated fashion as he, too, slowly gained his feet. "It would appear that I am still alive, not least due to your intervention, Captain."

"Damn it, Spock," clamoured McCoy, true to form and similarly unstable. "If you've been through half of what I have, couldn't you at least be just a little upset by it all? As if having a salt vampire chasing around inside my head wasn't bad enough, I wake up to find you making it sound like a bout of flu."

Spock's eyebrows rose again, but Kirk intervened before the discussion could proceed any further.

"You'll have enough time to compare notes later," he snapped. "Right now, I want to know what just happened, and I want to make sure it doesn't happen again."

As if on cue, Zen's disembodied voice filled the chamber. However, in contrast to the computerlike neutrality of its previous tones, there appeared to be a faintly deranged edge to its words this time, hysterical almost.

"Defence system breached. Security protocols overridden. Unauthorised intruders are on the flight deck. Zen must be protected at all costs."

"Does that mean that what we just experienced was this vessel's defence system?" asked Kirk of his First Officer.

"I believe so, Captain," replied Spock. "I would postulate a mechanism that implants images from a subject's past in his mind in order to disorientate and kill him. A most unusual device, but a highly effective one at that."

"Almost too effective." Kirk paused for a moment, then continued. "However, now that we've managed to ward off its effects, do you think..."

He never finished the sentence. A high-pitched whine suddenly rent the air, forcing the three officers to cover their ears with their hands. At the same time, the artificial lighting dropped to little more than a twilight level, and a shudder rippled through the deck.

"Zen must be protected," echoed the voice again. "Power overload building. Detonation in two minutes."

"Why don't I like the sound of that?" barked McCoy.

"Because it means we've got two minutes to get out of here," answered Kirk, already making for the exit from the flight deck. "Zen is obviously more willing to destroy itself than to allow us to gain control. Now, run!"

Spock and McCoy at his heels, the Enterprise's commanding officer set off at a sprint through the gangways and passages leading back to their initial beam-in coordinates. The seconds passed all too quickly as they raced against the clock to get back to the Enterprise before their present location was reduced to little more than its component atoms, a prospect that none of them had intended to savour after fighting off the defence system.

Eventually, however, they stumbled into the chamber where they had originally materialised. Exhausted, Kirk flipped open his communicator and almost cried out with relief when he heard the familiar voice at the other end of the frequency.

"Scott here, Captain. Are you all right, sir?"

"No, we're not, Scotty," replied the Captain, desperation lending his voice a cutting edge. "If you don't beam us off this ship and warp the Enterprise away from here within fifteen seconds, we'll all be dead."

"Understood, sir. Stand by."

Almost immediately the familiar sensation of dematerialisation swept over the landing party, and their next sight was the welcome scene of the Enterprise's transporter room. Without wasting a moment, Kirk dashed over to the console and flipped the intercom switch.

"Go, Scotty!"

A sudden lurch signified that the Enterprise had engaged emergency warp power, and the call from the bridge soon after was no less welcome.

"Whatever you did over there, Captain, that ship has just gone up in the biggest fireball seen in this sector for a few million years."

"And thanks to you, Mr Scott," Kirk replied gratefully, "we weren't a part of it. I'll be up shortly. Kirk out."

The Captain turned back to face his two colleagues, who were still standing beside the transporter platform recovering from their ordeals. A faint smile played across his lips before his expression became serious once again as

he squared up to his second in command.

"Well, Mr Spock," he began, "Doctor McCoy has informed us that he found himself in another confrontation with the creature from planet M113, and I don't mind admitting that I met Doctor Tristan Adams again in similarly unpleasant circumstances. How did Zen try to unravel your mind?"

Spock tried, unsuccessfully, not to look faintly embarrassed.

"I must confess, Captain, that my allotted death was to have taken place at Psi 2000."

"Are you saying that while Jim nearly lost his mind and I nearly lost my salt, all you were in danger of losing was your veneer of respectable Vulcan control?" queried McCoy, disbelief evident on his face. "What in the hell kind of a death is that?"

"A most unpleasant one, Doctor," answered Spock.

"And a most illogical one at that, Bones," added Kirk, his smile returning. "Surely the worst possible death for a Vulcan."

With McCoy's scowl still firmly in place and Spock's eyebrows as ascendant as ever, Kirk turned away from the transporter platform and began the journey back to the bridge.

His bridge.

Home.

SCOTTY'S LAMENT

They're bonnie wee bairns,
These engines o' mine,
And they power the ship through the stars.
I keep them in trim
Until that madman Jim
Decided it's time for Warp Nine.

And when forced to slow down,
All I get is a frown
When I tell him we nearly went bang,
But I soon have them fixed
With a miracle I've mixed,
And soon we are headed for home.

Christine Jones

THE MITREA INCIDENT

by

Rita Drake

"Captain's Log, Stardate 1365.1

The Bridge of the Enterprise is unusually quiet. After our last mission the crew are in need of R&R, so a course has been laid in to the nearest Starbase for this purpose..."

"Captain Kirk!" Uhura's voice broke into the log entry.

"Yes, Uhura?"

"I have just received a message from Starfleet Command. It reads as follows. 'Proceed to Starbase 25 as soon as possible and meet with Senator Bartock urgently. Message ends.'"

"Nothing else?"

"No, Captain."

Turning to Sulu, Kirk ordered, "Lay in a course for Starbase 25, warp factor 4."

"Aye aye, Captain," Sulu replied.

A few hours later they were orbiting Starbase 25.

"Starbase, this is the Enterprise. Captain Kirk here."

"Welcome, Enterprise, and also to you, Captain Kirk. Senator Bartock is ready to be beamed aboard as soon as you give us your coordinates," came the reply.

As they made their way to the transporter room, Kirk turned to Spock. "I wonder why we've been summoned here, and what we're in for."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think we are 'in for' anything, as you put it?"

Before Kirk could answer a very agitated Senator Bartock materialised aboard the Enterprise. He was a tall thin man with a mass of grey hair and of indeterminable age. Before Kirk could question him, he raised a hand for silence.

"All in good time, Captain. Let us wait until we reach the conference room."

As they made their way into the corridor Kirk glanced at Spock. "It must be something serious for a Senator to come in person," he whispered.

In the briefing room Dr McCoy and Mr Scott joined them at Kirk's order.

"Well," the Senator began, "we have received news that the Romulans have been seen on our side of the Neutral Zone near a small planetary system. Not much is known about the area; what little we do know is contained in this." Turning to the computer console, the Senator inserted a disc.

A picture of the planetary system appeared on the screen, and the readout began, basic information on the type of star and the size and composition of the five planets which orbited it.

"The system has one habitable planet," the report concluded. "It is known as Mitrea, and is the same distance from its star as Earth is from the

sun. No other information is available."

"We know very little," the Senator continued. "We have no way of knowing if the inhabitants are as technologically advanced as we are, or more so. However, they may need our help. We don't know what the Romulans are up to, but we certainly don't want them expanding their Empire."

"But I thought we had a treaty with the Romulans," Kirk put in.

"Correct," replied the Senator, "but it seems there has been a change in leadership. The new Praetor is power mad; he does not accept the treaty signed by the deposed leader, and looks upon it as a sign of weakness. He knows we don't have a treaty with Mitrea, so no doubt feels safe from Federation interference. It's up to you and your crew, Captain Kirk, to see if you can defuse the situation and get the Romulans back across the Neutral Zone into their own space."

He rose to leave, happy in the knowledge that if anyone could find a solution that did not involve loss of life, it would be Kirk and his crew. In his eagerness to leave he did not see the varied expressions on the faces of the officers - all except for Spock, who showed no emotion at all.

"Well!" Kirk was the first to break the silence. "What do you make of that? Anyone with any ideas?"

"As we know little or nothing of this planet, our approach should be a courteous one. We are in their system visiting planets to inquire if they would like to join the Federation, and to send and receive Ambassadors from other members - assuming, of course, that they have developed space travel," Spock replied.

"Excellent idea, Spock!" Kirk exclaimed. "That way, if the Romulans *are* in the area they can't accuse us of aggression, as it is they who have violated the treaty and crossed the Neutral Zone."

Turning to the console beside him, he pressed a switch. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Bridge here, Captain."

"Lay in a course for Mitrea, warp factor 3."

"Aye, Captain. Course laid in."

Back on the Bridge Kirk turned to Spock as they neared their destination. "Anything on the scanners?"

"Negative, Captain. I have completed a sweep of Mitrea and beyond. The whole area is clear of ships, Romulan or otherwise."

"We are now orbiting Mitrea, " Sulu broke in.

"Scan the planet, please, Spock," Kirk requested.

"Scan completed," Spock said a few minutes later. "They seem to be technologically advanced, going by the type of buildings they have, and they must have had space travel at some time. There are old space ships, something like a static display, on one part of the planet."

"Open a hailing channel," Kirk ordered.

"Channel open, Captain."

"Mitrea, this is Captain James T Kirk of the Starship Enterprise, representing the United Federation of

Planets, on a peaceful mission to your planet."

"Enterprise, this is Mitrea. Please could you tell us why you are really here?"

"Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?" Kirk asked.

"I am Zefa Rastrella, Zefa being my title. Again I ask, why are you here?"

"We come on a diplomatic mission wishing to meet the peoples of other worlds, and to find out if they would like to join the Federation of Planets, and to exchange Ambassadors," Kirk replied. "Could we beam down and discuss this with you, and other members of your Council?"

There was a pause. "Affirmative. The co-ordinates for our Conference Chamber are being relayed to your transporter as we speak," came the reply.

"Spock, Scotty, Dr McCoy, accompany me to the transporter. Sulu, you have the con."

They beamed down to a chamber full of light, although there was nothing to show where the light was coming from. Zefa Rastrella entered through an archway; she was a small woman, wearing a dress that shimmered with different colours as she moved. It fell from her shoulders to the ground at the back, but was shorter at the front; around her waist was a gold belt, and the sleeves were long at the back and short in the front, leaving most of her arms bare. There was no visible sign of emotion on her face, which was a golden colour with eyes of vivid blue; her hair was reddish gold cascading to her shoulders, and the light seemed to reflect and sparkle in it.

"Greetings. I am Zefa Rastrella." Placing her hands together just under her chin she gave a small bow of the head. "Please follow me."

They followed her through the archway into a larger room with the same lighting system. Around a table sat a group of men and women, seemingly of great age.

The oldest man, sitting at the head of the table, rose and greeted them. "Come in, gentlemen. Please be seated, and I will introduce myself and the others to you."

Although no word was spoken, they all heard his 'voice' in their heads.

"Ah, I can tell by your thoughts that you are puzzled as to how you can 'hear' us, although we have not spoken in words. I and the other Elders are full telepaths - and yes, we have had a visit from the Romulans. But first let me introduce you to the other members of the Council. I am Tol Zefe Maxerdon; these others are Don Zefe Nelerton and his pair-bond Del Zefa Chrarlon, and Don Zefe Sexeler and his pair-bond Del Zefa Bargerta. Ah, I am picking up some questioning thoughts. Rastrella will explain to you all alter."

"Thank you," Kirk replied. "Now may I introduce my officers. As you know, I am Captain James T Kirk. This is Commander Spock, Lt-Commander Scott, and Dr McCoy. You already seem to know why we are here, but nevertheless I will tell you in person. We had a treaty with the Romulans for them to keep to their side of the Neutral Zone and we would keep to ours. Then we heard that they had crossed over it into your planetary system. The Federation felt that we should come here and see if you require any help, just in case the Romulans did decide to try to take over

your planet."

"Thank you for your concern." They all heard the 'voice' of Tol Zefe Maxerdon in their heads. "But I doubt that your assistance will be needed, and we have a plan of our own. Perhaps your presence might be of extra help, an outward show that we are not completely helpless. Yes, your presence is most welcome. Would you care to have a look around our planet while you are here? I will have Zefa Rastrella tell you something about us."

"This way, gentlemen." Rastrella gestured for them to follow her, using the spoken word going towards another archway she waved her hand over a disc set at the side, and a door opened, revealing another room with seats and a large viewing screen.

"You are puzzled at the calm way Tol Zefe Maxerdon is taking the threat of an invasion, but I can assure you we do have a way of protecting ourselves from any threat the Romulans might make. They will soon realise that this planet is not worth their trouble, and that we have nothing of use to them. Some refreshment, perhaps, while I tell you something about our planet and its people."

Much to the surprise of Kirk and the others, drinks and food appeared before them.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you that the computers are tuned to thought patterns, so that anything you require appears." Still no emotion appeared on her face, and her apology was bland.

"Now to tell you something about our people. Many of your centuries ago we were a very warlike people, but in time peace came. Our Elders soon realised that to keep the peace we needed a way to control our emotions, which seemed to be the cause of all our troubles. Over the years we learned to control them, but in doing so we needed to find a way if mating for our race to continue. So touch bonding was developed. I see you are puzzled. The best way to describe it... Say two people are attracted to each other; they touch hands, then hearts, like this."

Going over to Spock she touched his hands then raised them to her chest, placing them there; she then rested her hands on his chest, then raised them to his head, and he did the same. Something strange passed between them, though there was no outward sign. Taking her hands away she sat down again and continued.

"If a feeling passes between them as they exchange these gestures, they become bonded. We believe it is necessary to have these feelings, otherwise the bonding will not last, and it is important that it does, so that the children born of the bonding will have a stable upbringing. Along with touch bonding we developed telepathy, so that we could transmit our feelings to our pair-bonded partner. This way we are also mind-linked, making our pair-bonding more stable, and any feeling we have are let out, making it easier to get on with our daily lives."

She paused, sipped at a drink, then continued, "With peace, we thought weapons were not needed, not realising that there would be people from other planets who would want to invade us. I suppose we were more interested in ourselves and bettering our living standards to think that there are other life forms out there." She gestured to the sky.

"What happened when the Romulans came?" asked Spock.

"I'm surprised they didn't leave troops behind," put in Kirk. "Even though you tell us you have no weapons to defend yourselves, the Romulans always leave troops behind to make sure the people of the planet they are taking over comply with their demands."

"The explanation could be that as this planetary system is beyond Federation boundaries they felt safe from any interference by a Starship," Spock replied.

"Hmm, you could be right there, Spock. But let's get back to the matter in hand - how best to defend this planet and its people without loss of life."

"Who says we need defending?" Rastrella asked.

"But we all thought that you did, as you just told us you have no weapons of any sort."

"So how can you defend yourselves without weapons?" asked Scott, who had been silent until then.

"It's a puzzle to me," added McCoy.

"Please do not concern yourselves. Our leader, Tol Zefe Maxerdon, has things under control. As he said, your presence here is also a help to his plans. Now would you all care to see something of our planet while we are waiting for the Romulans to reappear? I'm sure there will be something to interest you all."

So saying she went over to a panel and waved her hand over it. Two people entered from the far end, and she introduced them. "This is Zefe Laxerdon, who is what you would call an Engineer. He is very interested in space travel, and would like to know more about it, so I think that you, Mr Scott, will find him a worthy companion to show you around."

Turning to the Doctor, she continued, "We have no need of doctors on Mitrea; however, Zefe Yellertonm would be pleased to show you our library banks, where we have stored information on past diseases and cures; perhaps you will find something of interest there, Dr McCOy."

"Thank you," McCoy replied. "I'm sure I will."

As the four men left a beautiful woman entered; she was tall, with deep red hair and green eyes, and she was wearing similar clothing to Rastrella. Approaching Kirk, she introduced herself.

"I am Zefa Annatella. I am here to show you our planet." Taking Kirk's arm, she led him away.

Spock and Rastrella were left alone in the room. She took his hands as before, but this time raised them to either side of her face, lifting her own hands to his face. He heard her voice in his mind.

//You have been wounded - not physically, but in your pride. Although you do not show it, it hurt you and left an emptiness inside you. Can you feel something?// she inquired.

//Yes.// His voice entered her mind as hers had his. //I feel I am in your mind, as you are in mine. I feel a peace I have never felt before, also a longing and a belonging.//

//I feel the same,// she replied. *//Come.//*

She led him away to her chambers, where they bonded minds and bodies in a way Spock had never felt before.

Spock could not understand how this woman could have aroused his inner emotions. Pon farr had passed, and he had got over it, although she had spoken of it.

Sensing his feelings she touched him, and he heard her in his mind.

//Please do not concern yourself so. I was able to get deep inside you and bring out your hidden emotions - that is another part of our mind-bonding, to be able to reach down at get to our innermost thoughts and feelings. This way we are able to share any fears we might have, and so comfort one another.//

Spock understood, for he felt the peace in the shared feelings for the first time. *//How can we be together?//* he asked. *//I have my duties to the Enterprise and the Federation.//*

//Your duties will not last forever. There will come a time when we will be together. At that time I will be the Mitrean Ambassador to Valun; we can be properly pair-bonded and make children together.// she replied.

Spock felt contented and at peace; not for a long time had he felt that way.

"Now it is time that I took you to look at our laboratories and computers," she said after a considerable time had elapsed. "This way."

She led him to a transport system which looked like a monorail with bullet-shaped pods to ride in. All that was needed was a command, and they were taken to the laboratory complex, which was like nothing Spock had ever seen before. He began to lose himself in the wonder of it.

Meanwhile Jim Kirk was enjoying himself with Annatella, who had taken him to the entertainment complex, where every pleasure was catered for.

"Why," asked Kirk, "if you control your emotions, do you need these pleasure areas?"

"Everyone needs somewhere where they can relax. Many of these areas are provided for children and young adults. Come, I will show you something that will interest you, I'm sure."

Kirk followed her to a building containing a large viewscreen. Annatella went over to a console, and as she passed her hand over it a voice was heard.

"What is your pleasure?" A list appeared on the screen and the voice continued, "Tell me what you require and it will be programmed into the pleasure room."

Turning to Annatella Kirk enquired, "What does it mean?"

"It means," she replied, "that any place, any experience you have had in the past that you would like to relive, you tell the computer, and it will programme it for you; or if you would like to experience something new, give an outline of what you would like and again it will be programmed for you. It will even alter an experience you have already had, perhaps making it more pleasurable. The basic outline will do - the rest it can pick from your mind."

"But what about you?" asked Kirk. "Is there no experience you wish to live again? If there is, could we not share it? That would be more interesting."

Reading his thoughts, Annatella told herself that it could indeed be most interesting, as this was the first outworlder she had met whose thoughts were so basic, and she could feel his attraction to her. Yes, this would be interesting.

Although nothing showed on her face Kirk was aware of strange thoughts in his mind, as though someone was looking at them and reading them; then a

laugh sounded in his head, and a mind voice saying, *//Yes, Jim Kirk, I will indeed find the experience with you... interesting. Come - let us go to the mind-pleasure cubicle and share experiences.//* She took his arm, and again he heard laughter in his mind.

Scott and Dr McCoy were enjoying themselves as well, but eventually they all met back in the conference room.

"Did you all enjoy yourselves?" enquired Tol Zefe Maxerdon.

"Yes, we did," they replied together.

Maxerdon continued, "You would like some explanation for why we do not seem concerns about the Romulan threat."

"Correct," answered Kirk. "As far as I have seen, you have no defences at all."

"You are still concerned for us, even though I have told you you need not concern yourselves - we have everything under control."

Before he could continue Kirk's communicator beeped. "Sulu to Captain Kirk. Come in, Captain."

"Kirk here, Sulu. What's the trouble?"

"A Romulan ship has just appeared on our sensors. They haven't seen us yet as I've kept the planet between us."

"Good work, Sulu. Keep me posted. Kirk out."

No sooner had he finished speaking than three Romulans appeared in the conference room. The leader frowned at Kirk.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? What business have you on Mitrea?"

"I might ask the same of you," replied Kirk. "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise. This is my First Officer, Commander Spock; Lieutenant-Commander Scott, my Chief Engineer; Dr McCoy, my Chief Medical Officer. We are here on a diplomatic mission to ask the Mitreans if they would care to join the United Federation of Planets. And what, may I ask, are you Romulans doing across the agreed Neutral Zone?"

"What Neutral Zone?" the Romulan demanded. "We do not recognise such a thing. This planet is now a part of the Romulan Empire."

Rising from the table Tol Zefe Maxerdon enquired, "Who says that this planet is part of the Romulan Empire? Mitrea belongs to the Mitreans - no-one else."

"I, Zestilliann, say that it is so. Do not interfere, old man, or resist, or it will be necessary to use force."

"If you do then I will defend these people. Our Starship is on the other side of Mitrea, and has your ship in its sights," Kirk warned.

"Gentlemen, there is no need for violence." Maxerdon's 'voice' was heard in all their minds. Turning towards the Romulans he focussed his thoughts to them. "You have no need of this planet, Romulan; it is of no use to you or your Empire. We have no precious metals or minerals, or anything that you could use. Go back across your Neutral Zone and do not trouble us again." As he finished he slumped down into his chair.

The Romulan leader turned to his men. "Come, let us return to our ship.

There is nothing here that we need." So saying he took out his communicator and ordered his ship to beam them aboard.

Sulu's voice broke the ensuing silence. "Captain, come in. The Romulan ship has left orbit and is heading back towards the Neutral Zone."

A stunned Kirk replied, "Good. Carry on monitoring. Kirk out. What happened?" he asked, turning to the slumped figure of Tol Zefe Maxerdon.

Rastrella explained. "You remember the people you met earlier? Well, Maxerdon and the others are our High Council. They run our planet, and also have highly developed telepathy. By combining their minds they were able to plant in the minds of the Romulans the belief that this planet and its system would be of no use to them, and that they should go and leave us in peace, since we would be no danger to the." She paused. "As you can see, it takes a lot out of them when they use this power."

"Rastrella is quite correct." This time Maxerdon spoke aloud. "So we have decided to become a part of your Federation of Planets, for I fear that this sort of defence may not work again. We must accept that just because it has worked in the past it may not work forever."

"This is why you have never been invaded before?" Spock enquired.

"Yes, but we are all getting older; and next time the invaders may strike first. But for now, the danger is over. Captain, perhaps you and your crew would care to beam down for some relaxation. You would all be very welcome."

"Thank you," replied Kirk. "It would be nice for the crew to be able to see your beautiful planet and the pleasures it has to offer." He was thinking of the time he had spent in the pleasure room with Annatella, and that he would like to go back and sample some more of its delights.

Annatella picked up his thoughts, and he heard her laughter in his mind again, her voice saying, *//Very well, Jim Kirk. So be it.//*

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Sulu here, Captain."

"Sulu, arrange a rota for the crew to beam down to Mitrea for the R&R I promised them before this mission."

"Aye aye, Captain," came the happy reply.

Kirk was back on the Bridge of the Enterprise; all members of the crew had sampled the delights that Mitrea had to offer.

"Strange planet," commented Sulu.

"Why strange?" asked Kirk.

"Well, they show no outward sign of emotion, yet they have those pleasure areas for enjoyment. Still, I'm glad they did," Sulu replied.

A smile came to Kirk's face as he remembered his experience with Annatella. He turned to Spock, and observed a blank look on his face - the Vulcan was deep in thought.

The Vulcan's thoughts were with Rastrella, and what had passed between them. He was hoping that what she had said was true, and that they would be together soon.

"You're very quiet, Spock," said Kirk. "Anything the matter?"

"No, Jim, nothing. Perhaps I will be able to tell you more later, when I know more myself."

Kirk knew not to press his friend, for he recognised that look. Spock would tell him when he was ready to do so.

Turning to Sulu he said, "Right, let's be on our way. Take us out of orbit, ahead warp factor one."

"Aye aye, Captain."

SILVER DREAMS

Cruel mistress...

Who binds both hands and
Feet. Who fetters a lovelorn heart
So I am never
Complete without her...

Cruel lover...

No silken thighs all honey-kissed
Or soft warm breasts
On which to rest
My weary head...

Cruel lady...

Only silver dreams of
Power and grace; of flowing lines
That rip your breath from
Out your throat...

She...

Endless mystery without whom I'm
Nought but a man
Striving for stars.
Beloved... mine...

But *not* mine, and never -
Though I am yours.

Gaile Wood
(Inspired by The Naked Time)

THE TORTURE CHAMBER

by Sandy Catchick

Horrified, the young Vulcan stood frozen in his place of concealment, hardly daring to breathe for fear of alerting someone to his presence. The scene before him was terrifying. Vulcans rarely dreamed, let alone suffered nightmares, but the seven year old Spock knew that this torture chamber was worse than any he could have imagined in his most frightening of nightmares.

Even at such a young age his Vulcan training came to his assistance. Logic. That was the answer. Think things through. It was obvious to him that not only his own life, but that of four Humans, would depend on what he did, or did not do, in the next few minutes.

What was it his teachers had instructed? First, observe. That was it. He had to treat this in the same was as any computer or science task allotted to him. More at home with the thought of a computer, and summoning all his willpower, Spock attempted to control the fear that threatened to swamp him. As a Vulcan he knew he should not be experiencing fear. Shame made him strong. How would his mother feel if he acted less than Vulcan on this, his first visit to her home world? These were her people. It was his duty to save them. His father's reactions did not bear thinking about. He had to be strong. He had to master his fear and concentrate on logic.

His decision made, Spock peered out carefully from the storage cupboard in which he was hidden. He must mentally record the location of every person and every object in the torture chamber and then make his own escape to report his findings to someone who could overcome the torturers and free the poor Human captives. He had heard, but never before believed, that Humans could inflict such pain on each other. The captors, too, were Human.

One woman had been forced into a chair. Her captor loomed above her, weapon in hand. Spock admired her self control. Even a Vulcan would have difficulty maintaining such nonchalance under torture. The torturer used the strange weapon on the woman with practised ease. Her skull had been covered with layers of an unknown silver material, and the weapon was used to exert maximum pain on individual sections of her head, one at a time. Hardly an inch of her head remained undamaged. Spock saw the woman screw up her face in agony as the torturer moved in front of her, yet still she made no sound. Spock admired her bravery.

The second captive was not so stoic. She epitomised the hysterical, illogical females he had met at their welcome party at Earth's Vulcan Embassy the previous evening. He could not make out what she was saying, but the high, screeching quality of her voice indicated that she too was in pain. Her arms swung wildly as she attempted to avoid the spray aimed towards her.

Her captor held a ray gun in his left hand to discourage any escape attempt on her part. She had no choice but to endure. The young Vulcan had not seen such a weapon before. No doubt it was of Earth construction. Even at this distance he could tell that the weapon had several settings. He had no way of knowing if it was set to stun or to kill. He

deduced the odds were 78.23% in favour of the kill setting, taking into account the captive's compliance.

To one side yet another woman suffered in silence. She had been left unattended, encased in a module from which escape was impossible. The instrument of torture was undetermined. Spock could see beads of sweat on the pasty white face. A single, damp piece of hair hung down her forehead. This woman was old. She did not cry out. Her eyes were closed against the agony. Her body lay limp and exhausted; confined by the metal straps.

No one paid her any attention. Spock considered whether he could reach her and release her without alerting the torturers to his presence. Both men looked strong. They were dark haired and of dark complexion. The calm planes of their faces gave no hint of their sadistic nature. Spock knew that not all races were as peaceful as Vulcans. Humans were at best illogical; at worst incomprehensible; but never had he considered them capable of such behaviour. Surely torture was something confined to Human history? His mother was Human. From her he had learned only of Human caring. Was his mother an exception? Was this the reason his school mates watched his every action so closely? Determinedly he applied Vulcan mind techniques, fighting down his Human half and his overwhelming sense of despair.

Almost immediately his mind provided the answer. This was no torture chamber. It was a laboratory. The men were scientists. Faced with tests so dire that volunteers were not forthcoming, they had resorted to force. They had to be stopped.

This theory would explain the electrical impulses tied to the final captive. Her responses were being monitored. He could smell the chemicals, although he was unable to identify them. They were clearly effective. The woman's hair had already been distorted by their application. There was worse to come. A cup of liquid lay in front of the captive. Spock well knew the results of combining liquid and electricity.

He almost shuddered - but his Vulcan training won out.

Checking the location of the two torturers, Spock estimated the odds of his being able to release the old lady. They were 5 to 2 against. Acceptable.

He acted swiftly. It was not dignified for a Vulcan to run, but discretion was the better part of valour. He emerged from the cupboard and raced across the open space between himself and the old lady. In silence he pulled the wire connecting the module to the wall socket.

The woman screamed. Steam started to pour from the torture instrument, engulfing her head. She rose to her feet, banged her head on the module, and slumped back under the machine with a moan just as Spock reached her. He was too late to help her escape. His own chance of escape had gone.

The first captor turned at the woman's scream, swung the ray gun to cover him and shouted "You! Hold it right there! What on Earth do you think you're doing?"

Spock froze. Recovering quickly he steadfastly turned to face his enemy. Raising himself to his full height, fractionally below the man's waist, he replied, "I am attempting to save these women from your torture. I am prepared to offer myself as a specimen in exchange

for these Humans. Vulcan stamina is well known and you will no doubt be able to test your instruments more fully on me."

The man and Spock locked gazes, neither willing to back down. Time stood still.

Spock didn't think anything would be able to tear his eyes from those of his opponent, or the ray gun, which never wavered and which seemed to grow with every passing moment. He was wrong.

A bell tinkled and the laboratory door opened. Someone came in. Spock dared not take his gaze from the man in front of him to see who was coming up behind. A dignified voice uttered a single word. "Spock!"

He was galvanized into action. His need to protect the newcomer from the enemy made him forget the danger to himself and his Vulcan training. Instinctively, and without warning, he launched himself at his captor's knees, knowing even as he did so that the action was futile and the distance between them too great. The ray gun would beat him to it. The sacrifice was worth it.

A second voice halted him half way across the room, even before the unknown weapon could be fired. His enemy spoke.

"Lady Amanda! Do you know this young Vulcan?"

"Roberto, this is my son, Spock," she introduced calmly. "What is going on?"

Roberto was unable to explain. Instead he doubled up. The result was as dire as if Spock had actually managed to hit him in the solar plexus, the second stage of his attack plan. The most awful sounds were dragged out of him.

Regaining some control he weakly explained, "I am sorry, Lady Amanda, but your son appears to think this is a torture chamber and that it is his duty to save these ladies from Angelo and myself."

Amanda looked first at Spock, then at the four now smiling women, and finally back to Roberto. She bit her lip, and thinking of her husband, refrained from bursting out laughing herself. A mammoth effort. Eventually she managed to ask, "Has he done any damage?"

"No. No harm at all. You came in just in time."

"Then perhaps you would be so kind as to book me in for some torture at 2.00 p.m. tomorrow?"

"Your usual?"

"Of course." Then she added "And, Roberto, please stop pointing that hairdryer at my son. Don't you know it's rude to point?"

So saying she exited, collecting the stupefied Spock with a nod.

Once through the door she could keep control no longer. Her laughter was a sweet sound in the clear air of San Francisco Bay. Spock stared at her wonderingly. Sarek appeared from an aircar, looking alternatively mildly embarrassed and worried, as his wife continued to laugh until her sides ached. When she finally got her breath back she turned to her husband.

"Sarek, there are certain parts of our son's education that are clearly lacking. I am pleased we have been able to bring him to Earth to broaden his education."

"My wife, Vulcan education is among the best on offer in the

Federation," he responded.

"As far as it goes. It has failed to teach Spock the difference between pain and pleasure."

Sarek turned his attention to his son. Spock returned his gaze with a hint of puzzlement. Sarek forgave him the slight show of emotion. He, too, was at a loss to comprehend the Lady Amanda. "Explain, my wife."

"Only a Vulcan could bring up his son to believe Roberto's Hair Salon was a torture chamber."

Just then the salon door swung open and one of Roberto's four clients came out. Her hair wlas still encased in small pieces of tinfoil. Roberto's voice floated after her. "If you come back at 3.00 I will complete your set."

Sarek's gaze followed the woman until she rounded the corner. He got an inkling of what had happened. Father and son exchanged a rare look of complete understanding.

"My wife, if all Roberto's clients suffer so, then Spock's conclusion was quite logical. Roberto's *is* a torture chamber. It is beyond my understanding why you wish to subject yourself to his torture - and at such a high price."

Amanda, knowing in truth that Sarek would buy her anything she wanted, regardless of cost, regarded her two Vulcans soberly before letting a gleam of amusement show in her eyes.

"Why, Sarek, surely you would not wish the Ambassador's wife to be the only lady at tomorrow's dinner without her hair looking beautiful?"

I FEEL

I feel your emotion
Like fallen rain;
I feel your pain
As if it were mine.
I feel your anger,
Emotion strong;
I feel your strength
As if it were mine.

I feel your need for her
As the stars call;
I feel her hold on me...
Or is it yours, my friend,
I feel as well?

Joyce Devlin

THE SHINING LIGHT

by

Helen Cakebread

Mr Spock and Dr McCoy were waiting in the transporter room when the door opened and Kirk appeared.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said.

Kirk felt out of place. He was not in uniform. The wound he had sustained during the trip to Babel had healed but he was not fully fit, and since they were passing by a small holiday resort in Sector Nine McCoy had called in a past favour. Kirk had not wanted to go, but had bowed to Spock's logic. He tried to smile as he stood on the transporter pad, but his eyes were dull.

"Enjoy yourself, and relax. Spock and I will look after the Enterprise, and you'll soon be back. Make the most of your two weeks," said McCoy, trying to lighten his mood.

Kirk nodded. "Be careful," he said. "Energise."

Spock watched him disappear. His going left the ship feeling empty, as though the light had gone. However, they knew they had a job to do, and the first thing was to take medical supplies to Rac Mea, a small space station, a trip that would take four days.

Spock was sitting in the command chair when Uhura spoke. "Sir, I'm picking up a distress signal just off that dead planet."

"Let me hear the message, Lieutenant," Spock ordered.

"Please help us - we are on fire!" The voice was desperate.

"Three life form readings, there on a space shuttle," said Lt Taylor quietly; she was a Soan, a gentle creature with large green eyes. "Two Human, one Vulcan," she added.

"Mr Scott, lock on. Stand by to beam - we should be within range in three minutes," Spock ordered, heading for the transporter room.

McCoy was already there when he arrived, just as the three figures appeared. The first was a female wearing a light blue jumpsuit; her black hair was cut short, revealing upswept eyebrows and pointed ears. The next had McCoy's eyes popping out of his head, for it was Captain James Kirk - or was it? The third figure, a woman, was supporting him.

"Doctor, take them to Sickbay," Spock said softly. "Do not tell them your name."

"Please come this way," McCoy said.

The Captain was lying on a Sickbay bed. He had still not come round, and the Vulcan female was hovering over him as Spock came in. She followed Spock as he beckoned her into a briefing room.

"We can talk here," he said, then waited for her to speak.

"Are you from Vulcan?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"You are from the older clan. You must have much power. I am from Valan, a sister planet. My clan name is Spock, but I am also called Vala. I am First Officer. The others are Jena McCoy, ship's doctor, and my Captain, James Kirk."

"I, too, am Spock, First Officer." Her eyes widened. "My Captain is on leave. The doctor is McCoy, and I trust him with my life. Can you tell me what happened?"

"We were surveying a planet, taking samples. As we came out of orbit a storm hit us, and... here we are."

"These samples - may I see them?" asked Spock.

Vala opened a pouch at her belt and carefully lifted out a small grey rock. She stared at it. "It's not the same. It was like a gemstone."

"Perhaps in your universe, it was. What planet is it from?"

"Takr."

"Here Takr has been dead for thousands of years," Spock replied.

"We must try to get back. Perhaps if we return the rocks?"

"It will be dangerous, as I may not be able to give you the best time for your attempt. You might not return," warned Spock.

"We cannot stay here. We must try to mend the rip."

"What will you tell your Captain?"

"Nothing. He will obey. He is only a figurehead, as we have found that many planets do not regard females as leaders. He has his uses, but I give the orders."

When they returned to Sickbay the Captain was awake, but was just sitting taking no notice of what was happening around him. Spock looked at him; he was like an empty shell.

McCoy called the Vulcan over. "Spock, do you know why he's like that?"

"They have somehow caused it."

"I found some sort of mechanical device in his head."

Spock's eyebrow rose, but his expression remained controlled. Before McCoy could say anything more the Vulcan gestured him to silence. "We must go now - there are arrangements to make."

Spock had ordered a shuttle prepared with all identification removed. The female doctor helped Kirk in, then Vala turned and extended her raised hand to Spock. Their fingers touched, he nodded, then she turned away and the shuttle door closed.

Returning to the Bridge, Spock watched the shuttle take off. They followed it down to the dead planet and watched it settle, then begin to rise again.

"Sir, there's still a life reading on the planet," Lt Taylor said. "It's the Vulcan."

They watched as the shuttle rose higher, then it was gone.

Down on the planet Vala replaced

the rock samples, then stared in surprise as the shuttle took off. Around her the planet glowed with life. They had returned to their own universe, but she was alone.

"Sir, there are now no life readings on the planet."

"What happened?" McCoy asked.

"The other female must have taken over, left Vala behind," said Spock.

"What, her? More likely it was the Captain."

Spock swung round, looking puzzled.

"That's what I was trying to tell you. There was some sort of device in his head, but it wasn't working, so why the act?"

"Why indeed, Doctor," said Spock.

The Captain grinned. His plan had worked. How easy it had been to make Jena remove the faulty control chip. He was no-one's slave any more. Soon he would have other men to take over and get rid of the females. Well, not all of them - they did have their uses. As the shuttle came to a halt after spinning out of the storm he began to send his message.

"Captain Kirk to Enterprise."

"Captain, we are receiving you. Standing by."

Kirk saw the bay doors open. The shuttle glided in to rest, As the doors opened he stepped out, followed by the doctor, only to stop on his tracks. This was not his ship - what creatures were these? He saw one of them raise a weapon, heard the doctor scream as she fell dead at his feet. There was a sharp pain, and he saw his own life blood pumping from him as he collapsed by Jena's side. There was only one thought in his mind. *It should have been mine!*

One of the creatures moved towards the shuttle and entered. As he did so the craft blew up, taking the whole of the deck with it. Then in a devastating chain reaction the whole ship exploded, and only the stars remained.

Spock had told Vala that he had placed a device on board so that when they had returned safely the shuttle could be destroyed so that it could not be traced back. Unwittingly, the creature had activated the destruct beam.

It was time to pick up Jim Kirk. Spock and McCoy were both waiting in the transporter room when he appeared, smiling, his hazel eyes alive and twinkling with delight. Spock dropped his shields to bathe in the Human's emotions, and to feel the happiness only this special man could radiate.

"Permission to come aboard?" Kirk asked, trying to control his expression.

"Permission granted," replied Spock, his mask back in place.

"Well, gentlemen, how did you cope? You were right, Bones - I did need a rest."

"All was normal, Captain."

Kirk nodded and made his way to the Bridge, flanked by his two friends. He knew something was wrong with the Vulcan, but he would wait.

Spock watched his Captain as they made their way to the Bridge. The news spread quickly - the Captain was back. The light had returned.

He would tell Kirk what had happened once they had eaten and the Captain had the feel of his ship back. He knew Jim would find the right words to ease his mind. Only then could he play his lyre in a lament for her, a prayer that she would find peace.

T'HY'LA

My mind to your mind...
The meld has begun.
Our minds are one, T'hy'la -
Brother of my heart.
As always, you welcome me,
Your mind reaching out to mine
With its blend of love, acceptance, trust and respect.
When we are joined like this
We feel complete - whole -
Two who are one.

T'hy'la, what would have happened had we never met?
Neither of us likes that thought,
Not wanting to remember the loneliness
That each knew before meeting the other.
Thankfully, fate brought us together
And we are alone no more;
For we have become brothers,
And together we sail the stars.

Christine Jones

SIREN SONG

by

Jean Sloan

Isadora opened her eyes. Something was calling her, but in the cave where she lay there was no sound. As she took deep breaths her heart rate increased and her body temperature rose to normal. In response to the increased heat, lighting panels raised the level of illumination so that she was able to examine her surroundings.

The cave was no natural feature of the mountain; its walls had a metallic sheen and the metal table on which she lay was surrounded by dials and monitors. Still she felt the insistent calling in her head, the pull to she knew not what.

She sat up, then swivelled herself off the table; standing, at first hesitantly, then with more confidence, she faced a mirror in which she saw reflected a tall slim figure with delicate features and long golden hair, dressed in a fine blue gown. Unsteadily she walked towards the cave exit, knowing instinctively how to operate the door control. She stepped out of the cave onto a mountain ledge which allowed her to look down on Creation in all its beauty and wonder.

She sighed. Everything had changed in the aeons she had lain asleep, but now her kingdom was waiting to be possessed. She felt the chill of the mountains and returned gratefully to the controlled warmth of the cave, her sanctuary. She crossed to the small altar set in a corner. A touch of the panel illuminated a picture on the wall in front of her, a picture of a woman with long, golden hair and green eyes, somewhat older than Isadora.

"Mother," she whispered, "I am safe. My time is here." Then she placed both her hands on the altar, fingers spread, thumbs touching, and closed her eyes in concentration.

"Darius 11 ahead, Mr Spock."

"Thank you, Mr Chekov. Mr Sulu, assume standard orbit. Ms Uhura, page the Captain and inform him that we will be able to beam him down in 31.6 minutes."

"Complying, Mr Spock."

Spock rose from the command chair and crossed to the science station from where he could institute a survey of the planet.

The Bridge doors swooshed open and James T Kirk appeared, dressed in climbing gear. He crossed to the science station and peered over his First Officer's shoulder.

"A survey, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. The last recorded full sensor check of the planet was eleven point two months ago. I wanted to be sure that its status was unchanged."

"And is it?"

"Yes, sir. No lifeforms except such as are in accord with the list of beings currently using the planet."

"You mean people on holiday."

Spock ignore the interruption. "No unexpected seismic activity; no inimical weather patterns; the temperature varies between 23 and 30 degrees centigrade."

"It'll be on the cooler side where I'm going. The cabin is in the mountains."

"Scanning the mountain region now. Snow above the 4,000 metre line. Some mist drifting on...."

"What is it, Spock?"

"For a moment, a lifeform reading in the Tseron range; but it disappeared again almost instantly."

"Probably someone climbing and exploring the cave system there. Most likely gone into a cave, so stopped registering - unless it's a Darien Yeti," Kirk grinned.

Appalled by his Captain's dismissive levity, Spock looked up, one eyebrow elevated, and at last assimilated Kirk's attire. "Captain, I trust you are not going climbing without a companion."

"I most certainly am, Spock. I'm not denying myself the sort of holiday I like because none of you will come."

"Captain, you know quite well that Starfleet ordered us..."

"To attend the Fleet Wargames, I know. I was only joking - you know, that difficult concept.... Because Darius is reserved as a holiday planet, there is a very efficient Wilderness Area warden system. I'll register my climbing activities with the Warden's office, then if I fall off a mountain you'll know which one."

"What was that about climbing?" Leonard McCoy had come onto the Bridge just in time to catch the end of the conversation. "Jim Kirk, you are supposed to be resting and recovering from that bout of Aldebaran fever. Note resting; spot of swimming, lying in the sun, that sort of thing. Not using up what little reserves of energy you have by indulging in masochistic exercise. The cabin I rented for you is by a beach. I prescribed sea and sun!"

"I changed the booking." Kirk spoke quickly and quietly in the hope that the Doctor would miss the piece of information. He didn't.

"You did what? That's insubordination, Jim. I had to make the leave a medical order to force you to go and now.... What are you grinning at?"

Jim Kirk was in fact grinning at the Bridge crew, who had formed an interested audience to the exchange. McCoy realised that his voice had become too loud and moderated it.

"So where are you going?"

"The Captain has rented a small log cabin at the foot of the Tseron mountains. The area presents many opportunities for rock climbing and the range is honeycombed with caves to explore."

McCoy, who had been going to shout at Spock for not telling him of Kirk's plans, changed his mind as he registered the disapproval in the Vulcan's tone. However, James T Kirk was impervious both to his First Officer's doubts and to his Chief Medical Officer's anger.

He grinned. "I'm going to get my stuff. Coming to see me off, gentlemen?" Without awaiting a reply, he left.

Spock stood at parade rest, waiting to operate the transporter controls.

Outwardly he was calm, but inwardly he was apprehensive. James Kirk had been Captain of the USS Enterprise for exactly eleven months and three point four two days. In that time much had happened to wear the Captain down both physically and mentally. He seemed to have more than his quota of accidents and injuries, many of which occurred because of his impetuosity and disregard for danger.

The present enforced leave followed a bout of the virulent Aldebaran fever which had laid low a number of the ship's complement. The Captain had been particularly unwell, and McCoy had taken this as a sign of low resistance brought on by fatigue, and had prescribed leave. Kirk had protested vigorously, but to no avail. Spock's concern was that resentment of the leave would push Kirk to take chances with his safety.

Spock wished he could accompany the Captain, but Fleet activities rendered it impossible for both Captain and First Officer to be absent from the ship, so he made the best of the situation, concealing his disquiet, he hoped, from both Kirk and the eagle-eyed McCoy. He had grown accustomed to worrying about the Captain and no longer questioned his feelings in the matter, but he was most anxious not to reveal those feelings, which he regarded as a failing in himself, to the outside world.

Kirk arrived at last, hefting a variety of bundles, plonking them unceremoniously onto the transporter pad. "Well, gentlemen, enjoy your manoeuvres. I hope you will have forgiven me by the time I get back!"

McCoy harrumphed. Spock, standing a little behind the Doctor, raised an eyebrow. "We will return for you in 3.862 weeks, Captain."

Surprised at the precision, Kirk met the Vulcan's eyes and smiled as the transporter effect took him.

The cabin was exceedingly well equipped. Although Kirk enjoyed roughing it, he was glad in this instance that a state-of-the-art food processor would see to his culinary requirements. He would never have admitted it to McCoy, but he still tired easily and he had no intention of overtaxing his strength. Such climbing excursions as he planned were of only moderate difficulty and length.

He was quite looking forward to the solitude of the hills, but he did wish that Spock had been able to come; the Vulcan was a peaceful and calming presence. He would have postponed his leave until after the Wargames, but McCoy would not hear of it; so here he was, in this cabin in the hills, alone.

For four days he pottered in the woods round the cabin. He found a small lake where the water was warm enough to swim. He jogged morning and evening to build up his strength. In his spare time he collected suitable pieces of wood and started to fashion a chess set; he thought he would give it to Spock on his return to the ship.

On the fifth day, he woke up feeling strong and well. He decided to climb as far as the lowest set of mountain caves, so suitably equipped and provisioned for the day, he set off.

He reached the first group of caves easily, without great exertion. They were fairly uninteresting, small, individual, no interlinking system to explore. Since it was still only midday, he decided that he could afford to go further and as he climbed he felt a strong sense of well-being, as if he could continue onwards

and upwards forever. He knew he ought to pause, rest, then turn back, but the desire to keep on was too strong for his commonsense, so he climbed well into the afternoon.

Eventually he reached a ledge and sat down to consume a long overdue lunch. He looked at the sky; to his dismay he realised that it was now late afternoon and that he would not have time to descend before darkness fell. With the realization came a sudden feeling of exhaustion. All the strength he had felt seemed to ebb away at once leaving him drained, sick and dizzy. His head swam and darkness claimed him.

When he awoke, or recovered consciousness, he was not sure which applied, he was lying on a metallic table. He tried to sit up, but he had no strength and his head throbbed. He turned his head to look at his surroundings. He seemed to be in a cave of sorts, though it was not natural. The walls were constructed from, or lined with, metal and they contained lighting panels. There was no discernible exit. A sound caught his attention. At the far side of the room a panel slid open admitting the loveliest woman he had seen for a long time. She crossed to him quickly.

"You are Kirk." She spoke hesitantly, as if the language were foreign to her.

He nodded. "How did you know my name? Who are you?"

"I took your name from your mind when I called you. I am Isadora."

"What do you mean, 'called' me?"

"You are for me. My mate. The Truthtellers said that when I woke to continue the race, a mate would come. I waited, then you came into my ring of influence. You were too weak to reach me, so I imbued you with wings of strength and here you are. However my mental efforts exhausted me and I had to release my sustaining power so that your weakness overcame you again. You will heal; I will help you."

"I was on holiday, climbing. I came here by accident."

"No, all things are decided. Your destiny is to father our race."

Kirk had been watching the girl closely and he was convinced of two things: she was telling the truth as she saw it; and she was speaking through some kind of universal translator - he had first taken the device for a necklace.

He found that he could sit up now. "Isadora, I do not belong here. I have another life and other... duties."

"Such things will cease to matter. When our race died out because of the Disease, I was selected to survive. I was made to rest while Creation renewed itself and life began again. The Truthtellers, they who foresaw all things, decreed that when it was time I would awake and take to mate one who would come. You are that one. You shall stay with me and we will possess our kingdom."

Kirk decided that compliance would be the best course for the moment. "Where is our kingdom?"

Isadora gestured towards a blank wall. "There. It is all around in its wondrous beauty. But come, you must eat and rest until you are strong."

She led him to an alcove which contained a table and chairs of the same

metallic substance as the cave itself. An aperture in the wall turned out to be some sort of food processor. She produced for him something that looked like vegetable stew which was quite palatable and some fresh fruit. At the end of the meal she gave him a warm beverage to drink.

"It is good, a digestive.."

As Kirk sipped it, he felt his head slipping forward onto his arms. Isadora picked up the sleeping form as if he were featherweight and carried him to a couch in an alcove. She looked at him thoughtfully.

"Your thoughts tell me that you do not accept your fate. You are intelligent and you are biding your time until you can leave, but you will not. You will sleep now and you will forget and accept. The one named Spock will not find you, for here we lie shielded." She left him sleeping and went to her tiny altar to meditate.

The USS Enterprise acquitted herself well in the Wargames, as James T Kirk liked to call them, though Starfleet preferred the less militaristic "manoeuvres", and won the Victor Ludorum.

The award was a custom of which Spock did not approve. It was unnecessary to give awards or incentives for the performance of one's duty. He had to endure the formality of a presentation on the Excalibur, which was acting as flagship. The occasion was a grand gala dinner to which the senior officers were invited whilst the crew celebrated on board the Enterprise.

During the reception before the formal dinner, Spock was talking quietly to Du-En-Vray, the Excalibur's Science Officer, when the pair were approached by Admiral Bossigny, currently second-in-charge of Starfleet Operations.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. Mr Spock, may I gave a word with you?"

"Sir." Spock inclined his head. He excused himself and followed the Admiral to an alcove in a quiet corner. The Admiral indicated that Spock should sit.

"Mr Spock, you are a Vulcan, so I will come straight to the point. Your performance in the current manoeuvres was exemplary. The way your read the scenario, the strategies you used and your final solution, all indicate command abilities of the highest order. Your preference for diplomatic solutions is on record, but your willingness to use force where necessary to achieve goals is a matter of record too. Exactly the balanced approach that Starfleet likes to see in its commanding officers.

"It seems to me that your abilities are underused aboard the Enterprise. I would suggest that you apply for promotion; the position of Captain on the USS Minerva will soon become vacant. Her next mission will be scientific research at the Galactic Barrier. I have perused your record and you are particularly suited to command such an expedition by virtue of your experience of the phenomena caused by the Barrier. I would be happy to recommend your promotion, as I am sure would Captain Kirk."

For a moment Spock said nothing, then, "Admiral, if you have read my service record, you will know that I have stated on more than one occasion that I do not seek command."

"Agreed. But it was the opinion of

Christopher Pike that you underrated your own abilities. Your service record was reviewed when Captain Kirk assumed command. You put in a request for transfer shortly afterwards and the possibility of your promotion was discussed than, but when you withdrew the request after the events on Delta Vega, it was seen as sensible to leave you until staffing difficulties had been sorted out. The ship's performance in the tests demonstrates how able a team its senior officers have become. I am sure you can now be spared to attend to your own career."

"Admiral, I can only repeat that I do not wish for command. In all respects I prefer my scientific duties."

"The Minervas's mission will be a scientist's dream, Mr Spock. Look, I am not asking you to decide anything now. Just give the matter some thought - promise me that much. From Starfleet's point of view, to assign you the captaincy of the Minerva would be the best possible use of material." The Admiral stood up. "Well?"

"I promise that I will think about your offer, Admiral."

"Good. Come on, dinner has been called."

So it was that the next day Spock set off to recover his Captain with a boatload of hangovers and a lot on his mind.

Twenty hours later, the Enterprise entered the quadrant in which Darius 11 was situated. Spock immediately instructed Uhura to contact the portable comm unit which he had insisted Kirk take to install in his cabin. It had a larger range than the standard communicator and could broadcast a powerful distress beam if necessary. Kirk had accused Spock of fussing, but had taken the unit nevertheless, grateful for his First Officer's concern.

"Mr Spock, there's no reply from the Captain's comm channel. He must be out."

"Please try again, Ms Uhura. It is unlikely that the Captain is absent. It is 4.28am Darius time."

Uhura smiled to herself. It wouldn't occur to Mr Spock that it was a very uncivilized hour to call the Captain. "Perhaps Captain Kirk is asleep, or maybe we woke him an he's ignoring the signal," she suggested.

Spock raised an eyebrow, but did not comment. Though he would barely admit it to himself, he was extremely anxious to re-establish communications with Jim Kirk, to ascertain that the Captain was all right, so that the subliminal worry which he had endured since Kirk's departure could be eliminated. However, he recognised the sense of Uhura's words.

"You may be correct, Ms Uhura. Please try again just before the end of your watch."

At that time, Uhura had the same report to make. The comm unit was activated and paging, but there was no answer. The Vulcan looked thoughtful. The Captain could have left for an early start climbing. Perhaps he had camped out overnight. He wasn't due to return to the ship for 16.5 hours. No doubt he was taking advantage of the last day of his leave.

"Very well, Lieutenant, leave it. I believe your duty shift should have ended 5.6 minutes ago."

Uhura smiled. "That's quite all right sir, I don't mind a bit. I'm looking forward to seeing the Captain, too."

She left the Bridge still smiling, leaving Spock to assimilate the implications of her remark.

To pass the time, Spock gave Admiral Bossigny's words some thought. The Vulcan meant it when he said he did not want command. He found dealing with the irrationalities of Humans tiring and confusing. He had learned a lot from James T Kirk, true; and dealing with the crew had become easier since Kirk came on board. Spock had no idea why, unless it was that Kirk's example of accepting the Vulcan as he was had made the crew do the same.

Admiral Bossigny had implied that to put in for this promotion was Spock's duty, and scientifically the mission would be fascinating, but the mission would end and then there would be other missions less satisfying. What did he want for himself? He had not reassessed his career since the arrival of Captain Kirk.

At first he had stayed on the Enterprise out of a sense of duty to the ship and Captain Pike, to ease the transition between Captains. He had filed the transfer request on Pike's departure, requesting reassignment after the new CO's settling in period.

His first instinct on meeting the impetuous young man who was the new Captain was to wish he had gone with Pike. Then Kirk's approach to command piqued his curiosity, so he withdrew his request.

Working with Kirk had become a habit, then something more. He was content in his present position, but perhaps he was neglecting his duty to Starfleet. Perhaps it was wrong to turn aside promotion for the comfortable and the familiar. Never in his life before Jim Kirk came into it had he felt as if he belonged.

Friendship; it was a new experience for him. He admitted that it was, finally, Jim Kirk offering friendship which made him want to stay on this vessel which had become his home. Obviously Uhura understood his feelings in the matter too, he reflected with some embarrassment.

It had become Kirk's habit to sit on the rocky ledge outside the cave in the early evening to watch the sunset. Isadora opened the cave wall for him; he did not know yet how to do it, although she said she would teach him soon. He always stayed out until the stars appeared, braving the night chill to look at them. Isadora said that he had lived among the stars in his last life, but that he had left that life behind. He believed her. He remembered nothing of that life, though he loved the cold beauty of the night sky. He had been ill, she said, but he was regaining his strength daily. He loved Isadora deeply, wanted to take her in his arms, to love her, but she would not permit it. He was not yet strong enough. She was in his mind though, and with that he had to be content for now.

The daily routine was simple. She woke him with a steaming bowl of herb tea - she had a variety of herbal drinks for different hours of the day - then she would massage his body and lightly touch his mind so that he felt invigorated. They talked for many hours. She told him of the history of her world and they walked together through the maze of tunnels which formed their home. Then nightly he sat and looked at the stars, feeling a strange longing to go to them.

When he told her of his longing, she just laughed and called him a dreamer. He soon forgot such longings in his nearness to her.

One evening Kirk was, as usual, outside. Isadora knelt at her altar in meditation. Suddenly she stiffened, then moved swiftly to call Kirk in. The stars were very bright and as she came to him, Kirk pointed to one star which moved through the heavens. He wanted to stay and watch, but her anxiety communicated itself to him; at her repeated bidding he went inside with her. The cave wall shut smoothly behind them, not a crack or mark revealing its existence.

"There is still no reply, Mr Spock, and sensors show no Human life readings in the vicinity."

"Lieutenant, contact the Warden's Office; find out if Captain Kirk has registered an excursion."

"Aye, sir."

While Uhura was making her contact Spock sat motionless in the command chair, his face an impassive mask. He found himself imagining Kirk lying injured, or worse... Illogical to imagine! He consciously exerted control.

"Sir, the Captain only registered once with the Warden, five days after his arrival. He did not report back. The rescue services were alerted. No trace of him has been found." Uhura's voice was not quite steady. "I'm sorry, Mr Spock."

There was a moment of silence as the Bridge crew assimilated the news. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr Sulu, you have the Con. I am beaming down to the planet with a search party. Lieutenant, please ask Dr McCoy to join me in the transporter room for landing party detail. Brief him on what has occurred." Before Uhura could acknowledge the order, Spock had gone.

They materialised outside the log cabin which Kirk had rented. McCoy looked serious, as did the rest of the landing party. Spock merely looked impassive. He moved quickly into the cabin and began searching through Kirk's belongings.

"Spock, what do you think...?"

"I am ascertaining where the Captain intended to go, Doctor. His climbing gear is missing, as is his thermal jacket. He intended then to explore the caves."

McCoy opened his mouth, but could think of no suitable retort. "I knew Jim'd get into bother. You can always count on him."

"Doctor, I shall divide the landing detail into two groups, operating on different sections of the mountain. There is one track to the cave system marked on this map; I shall send Benson's group that way. If you would be so good as to accompany me, we will try a different direction."

"You're assuming that Jim avoided the conventional path?"

"Of course, Doctor. And if he is alive," Spock's voice hesitated on the word, "he is inside the caves. It is the only explanation for the complete sensor blank."

Spock sent off Benson and Carstairs and headed towards the rock face with McCoy. From close up, the mountain seemed sheer.

"No-one could get up there, Spock, the rock's smooth..."

"No it is not, Doctor, and the Captain enjoys rock climbing. Look, there are marks here consistent with someone making an ascent."

"Well done, Sherlock; but you're not expecting me to climb it? I'm a Doctor, not a mountaineer."

Spock was silent for a few moments, then he produced a pair of lightweight binoculars from a pouch and scanned the bulk of the rock above them. "There is a ledge, Doctor. I will ask Mr Scott to place us there."

McCoy swallowed, went to object, then changed his mind at the grim expression on Spock's face. "Don't worry, Spock, we'll find him."

"Yes, I certainly will, Doctor, whatever his condition."

McCoy did not doubt his companion's sincerity.

The ledge on which the pair found themselves was on the cave level below the one in which Kirk was held. Spock quickly established that the caves blocked sensors and communication, and that someone had been there recently. They quartered the caves minutely, examining holes, ledges and recesses, dreading what they might find. At last, McCoy called a halt.

"Spock, I've got to stop, I can't think straight. You need rest too.

"You are wrong, Doctor, I can continue. Every second may be precious. I will finish searching this system; you beam back to the ship and I will join you there."

"No, Spock, I'll rest here. If you get into difficulty, or if you find Jim, at least I'll be on hand. Communicators work within the rock, don't they?"

"Not with any consistency, Doctor."

"What is wrong, Isadora? Why do you fear the moving star?"

Isadora took Kirk's face in her hands. "It is nothing - superstition - humour me. Have some tea now and then sleep."

She poured him some of the beverage and he drank deeply and gratefully, then his head fell forwards and he slept. Again, she carried him to his bed. She returned, troubled, to her meditation altar. For a long time she waited, still, concentrating. At last she sensed minds nearby, one very receptive to projected thought. She spread her hands on the stone altar and entered a trance.

After two hours, Spock returned to find McCoy asleep. The Vulcan was wet, cold and bedraggled. His expression of impassivity had given way to exhaustion and his worry showed plainly. He sat down and leaned wearily against the unyielding rock. Unbidden, images came into his mind of Kirk's body, broken and torn, lying in some unspecified place. The words *Jim is dead* rang in his head until he could bear it no longer. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to dispel the dread which gripped him and the despair which threatened to overwhelm his control.

McCoy tossed violently in his sleep

and called out, "Jim! Jim's.... No, a nightmare. Spock, how long have I been asleep? Spock, what's wrong?"

The question was occasioned by Spock's rigid body and tightly clenched fists, his posture just discernible in the glow from the cave-lamp which was set on the floor.

The Vulcan opened his eyes and his shoulders relaxed. "I was meditating, Doctor, resting as you were." Dissembling made Spock ashamed but exactitude would have brought him worse shame.

McCoy frowned. He had seen Spock meditate; it had never looked like that. The Vulcan was speaking again.

"You had a nightmare?"

"Yes, I dreamed I saw Jim's dead body." McCoy's voice cracked then became husky. "Sorry, Spock - Human emotion. It was very real."

"I too find I have only a precarious hold on hope, Doctor." Unsure why he had made that admission, Spock went out of the cave to contact the ship.

An hour or so later, Spock was kneeling on his meditation stone. The search had had to be abandoned at planet dark. The Vulcan had showered and eaten; now he was trying to order his mind and calm his emotions so that he could think logically.

His sense of dread had lessened on his return to the ship. There were facets of the burst of emotion he had felt which puzzled his logical mind. Why had the images of Kirk's death been so precise? He had questioned McCoy about his dream and though the Doctor's recall did not have the precision of Spock's, there were similarities between the two perceptions of the Captain's fate, not least the timing of the visions, as if someone or something had projected the images.

If that is so, thought Spock, *then it suggests that the Captain is still alive and we are being dissuaded from continuing the search.*

On a thought, he called up the computer record of his scan of the planet before the Captain's beam-down. The life reading blip he had detected showed and he caught it on hold. It was impossible to be sure about its exact location, but it was in the area where he and McCoy had searched, perhaps higher up the mountain. Thoughtfully, he cancelled the program.

He returned to his meditation stone. There were other facets of his experience to examine. The image of Kirk, dead, had brought him near to weeping and he had, frankly, lied to McCoy. He had neither wept nor lied since a child. It was as if his mind had been manipulated by someone who knew nothing of Vulcans. But perhaps he was lying to himself now, making excuses.

Kirk had affected him more than he had been willing to acknowledge. His Human half responded to the Captain; he must face that now. Did Jim know that his friendship was reciprocated? Spock thought that he probably did. He suspected that Jim knew him better than he knew himself. Uhura seemed to realise, too. How many others had noticed his slips in control, he wondered. He must ensure that he did not again expose himself to scrutiny. Then to aid his future control, he faced the possibility of Jim Kirk's death and what it would mean to him.

Late on the following day, Spock's despair returned with renewed force. He

had resumed the search at first light, higher up the mountain where a more elaborate cave system was found. McCoy, Benson and Carstairs shared the task of examining the caves which went deep into the rock. As darkness approached it became clear that the Humans were exhausted; Spock sent them back to the ship and brought down another group to search all night. Once darkness fell they would have to stay inside the caves; to venture out would be suicide.

As the first party prepared to beam up, it dawned on McCoy that Spock was staying. "Spock, you need rest too. Come up to the ship for a few hours."

"I cannot, Doctor. I would not be able to return until the morning. I am not prepared to waste that much time. I will rest for a while before I resume searching."

"Look, Spock, God knows I don't want to say this, but it looks hopeless. If Jim is in there, we could still miss him. We've started to search sections for a second time on numerous occasions. How many sections have we missed altogether? Tricorders don't work, communicators only work spasmodically. If Jim were unconscious, he could be anywhere, and Spock, it's been nearly three weeks: it's cold in there. You know, I don't think he would have survived."

Spock's face showed nothing; he spoke evenly, without inflexion. "What would you have me do? Give up what I believe you would call an 'outside chance' that the Captain might be in there waiting, Doctor? I have to be sure."

Spock settled down by the mouth of the cave, resting physically at least, but his brain continued to analyse the situation. Suddenly his mind was flooded with the same images as before.

The Vulcan caught his breath and stiffened, but this time he did not give in to the horror. Instead he tried to project disbelief, seeking to lock on to the consciousness which was invading his.

The images disappeared suddenly, leaving him shaking. On an impulse, he directed his thoughts to Jim Kirk, concentrating to the point of exhaustion, but his efforts produced no answering awareness.

Giving up, he leaned weakly against the rock surface. His brain was telling him to accept that Jim Kirk was dead, and he did not think that this time the idea was from an outside source.

Isadora had kept Kirk drugged; she could not explain to him why he could not be permitted to go outside. She had tried to frighten away the searchers she had detected in the caves around, but they - one in particular - would not be deterred. She thought she might have made a mistake in contacting the one named Spock. He had recognised the contact for what it was and had become suspicious. He had sought out her mind, so she had had to block her thoughts.

Kirk stirred restlessly in his sleep, muttering something - the name of the troublesome being, Spock. She put her hand on his brow to still him, but instead he sat bolt upright.

"Spock! Where's Spock? What have you done to him?" He grasped her arm and pulled her towards him. "You have kept me here. How long?"

She tried to pull away and soothe him. "It's a dream, Jim. You have been dreaming of your past life. Now your life is here, with me."

He let her go abruptly and she went to fetch him a drink. "Here, tea - drink."

He took the cup, then suddenly hurled it across the room. "No! No tea. Open the cave."

"No, I cannot, you will hurt yourself. It is dark and dangerous on the mountain. Wait until morning."

"No, now." He pulled her towards the blank wall. "Open it."

She put her arms around him and drew him close. "Come, Jim. Come to me. It is time."

For a moment, it seemed as if he would succumb, then he pushed her away gently. "No, Isadora. Spock... Spock is in trouble. He is important to me. I must go to find him. Open the cave."

She looked at him, tears filling her eyes: moments later he stood unsteadily on his ledge, gazing at the stars. He saw one bright star moving across the sky. His sense of urgency deserted him and he sank down to lean against the cliff face, claimed by lethargy, watching the star in only partial comprehension. He knew that it was important, but he could not focus on why. The answer teased on the edge of his conscious mind.

Spock was bone-weary as he made his way back to the cave entrance. Dawn was just breaking as he stepped outside to arrange for the beam-up of the search party who were standing huddled together against the sharp morning air.

"Spock to Enterprise. Three to beam up."

"Mr Spock, are ye plannin' on stayin' there? Leonard'll be none too pleased aboot that."

"I do not envisage being long behind, Mr Scott. Tell McCoy that our search was - fruitless."

"I'm sorry, Spock; the Captain'll be sorely missed and no mistake. Scott out."

Spock paused a moment before he closed his communicator, trying to clear the lump in his throat; then he turned decisively to issue instructions.

As the search party shimmered out of existence, Spock acknowledged finally that Kirk was gone and prepared to enfold that area of his life in a veil of control; but it was not that easy. He moved among the boulders on the ledge checking for equipment that might have been forgotten, but not really seeing. Moments of happiness in Kirk's company swam into his mind unbidden, tearing at the edges of his stoicism. Giving up the unequal struggle with his treacherous Human emotions, he sat down on a convenient boulder and turned his face to the heat of the rising sun, trying to still the grief in his heart. He did not see a figure detach itself from the rock face and come towards him hesitantly.

"Spock?" The voice was questioning and unsure, but unmistakably Jim Kirk's. The Vulcan turned slowly, disbelieving.

"Jim!" Spock's eyes lit up with joy and he grasped the Captain's arms in wonder, but let go quickly as Kirk shrank back, uncertain. More gently, Spock reached for Kirk and drew the bewildered Human into his arms.

"Come, Jim, you are safe. I'll take you home." Emotion thickened his voice.

No longer afraid, Kirk allowed

himself to be beamed up.

McCoy grinned hugely, "It's good news, Spock. He's going to recover. He's been drugged systematically. The substance is not on record. It's based on a herb compound. In a week or so the drug would have lost its ability to affect him. At present his memory is uncertain and he has periods of disorientation, but he's improving all the time. He seems to recognise you, though not me or his surroundings - yet."

"Can I see him, Doctor?"

"Yes, Spock - in fact he asks for you all the time."

Spock walked into the side ward and was rewarded with a smile and an outstretched hand. The Vulcan's eyes were gentle as he inclined his head to Kirk, but the exterior he presented to McCoy behind him was stiff and formal. "Captain, I am pleased to see that you are recovering."

Kirk frowned, his still clouded mind confused by the formality of the greeting. Realising the effect his demeanour was having, the Vulcan continued,

"How do you feel, Jim?"

Kirk relaxed slightly at the use of his Christian name. "Good, Spock. I know there's something wrong with me - my memory's hazy, but I know you. You called to me and made me wake up. Isadora was angry with me. She wouldn't let me go to look for you, but I made her open the cave wall. It was dark though, and I couldn't see. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, you were there. I was so glad to see you."

"Who is Isadora, Captain?"

"Not now, Spock." McCoy came forward, looking at the Vulcan curiously. "He needs rest."

"Bones?" Kirk's voice was tentative, McCoy nodded. "Bones, I'm fine. I want to talk. To remember."

He told Spock what he could of Isadora and her mountain home. "I was to be her mate. I - longed for her. I still do. Spock, you must find her, see that she is all right." There was sorrow in Kirk's voice as he spoke. He lay back on the pillows and closed his eyes. Spock looked at the Doctor.

"He'll be fine, Spock - but I'd like a word, please - in my office."

As the door thunked shut behind them, McCoy rounded on the Vulcan. "What's the matter with you, you green-blooded block of ice? That's Jim out there. He needs all our support - the drug's not out of his system and he's unsure of himself, searching for his identity. Spock, he needs a little Human comfort, not formal interrogation. Why can't you unbend for once? He relies on you, God knows why..." McCoy subsided into a chair. "What did he mean, you 'called' to him?"

"I was attempting to initiate mind contact with the Captain, Doctor. I was obviously partially successful."

"Spock, I don't understand you. You were frantic down on that planet searching for him - and then this mind contact thing... then in there..." McCoy gestured in the direction of Sickbay, shaking his head.

"Why don't you make up your mind, Spock? What do you want of him?"

"Have you quite finished, Doctor

McCoy?" Spock turned for the door, but McCoy blocked his exit.

"No, I haven't finished. You're going to hear me out. This friendship of yours and his; he does all the giving, you do all the taking. You take his understanding and his concern for you; his affection; and you give nothing in return. I don't know why he bothers."

Spock stood rigid, exerting desperate control over his mounting anger. At last he said calmly: "Doctor, I am a Vulcan. I live by the tenet of logic, by the control of emotion; it is a tenet which would vastly improve your relationship with your world. Will that be all?"

McCoy, bereft of words, nodded and Spock left Sickbay calmly. As the door closed, the Doctor shook his head sadly. *I don't know, one of these days, that damn Vulcan will give me apoplexy.* He went to pour himself a stiff drink

For the next few days Kirk slept, mostly. Spock instituted a thorough search of the area where he had found Jim Kirk, but there was no trace of the artificial cave. At last, Spock went alone to the mountain at dusk. Kneeling on the ledge where he had found the Captain, he composed himself then opened his mind. At first nothing, then,

'Spock of Vulcan, you have won. You have taken my mate and my race's future. I saw in his mind and from his words that he is bound to you by deep loyalty and honest love. I love him, but I cannot break that bond he shares with you. I understand now that I was wrong to try.'

'Isadora, my Captain is concerned for you. If you come with us to our world, we can help you.'

'No, Spock. My fate is written. I will sleep once more. A mate will come.' The mind voice was sad.

'Fate is made by the individual, Isadora. You can be self-determining, decide your own future.'

'You are wrong, Vulcan. Our place in Creation is ordained. Mine is to wait; his is to rule the light in the sky; yours is to be his strength and support - by his side always. To leave your destined path is to sacrifice happiness. I will stay here and rest content.'

The mind contact terminated. Spock returned, thoughtful, to the ship.

The Captain was on the mend. Spock told him about Isadora, omitting most of the detail of their communication. Although Kirk was saddened, he seemed unsurprised by her decision. "To live a life waiting in oblivion... It's a waste, Spock."

The next day Spock arrived carrying a small wooden box. Kirk opened it to find the chess set which he had started to carve at the beginning of his ill-fated leave.

"Why, Spock - you rescued it!"

"I have brought some of the wood, Captain. Perhaps you could occupy your time making the remaining pieces."

"What was that?" McCoy had arrived in time to hear the suggestion. "Are you intending to drive the nursing staff mad by scattering wood shavings all over the floor?"

"No, Bones." Kirk's grin was mischievous. "Not if you let me go to my quarters."

"As a matter of fact, Captain, that was exactly what I was going to suggest. But you're not clear for duty - understand. Oh, Spock, Uhura called down here just before you arrived. Seems Admiral Bossigny wants to speak to you. I told her to tell him that you'd call him back."

"I'm sure the Admiral was pleased to hear that," said Kirk, grinning, but his smile faded at the expression on his First Officer's face. "Spock?"

"The Admiral wishes me to conclude some business which he broached during the manoeuvres, Captain. If you will excuse me..."

As Spock strode towards the privacy of his quarters, he found himself replaying his conversation with Bossigny. "From Starfleet's point of view, to assign you to the Captaincy of the Minerva would be the best possible use of material."

He knew Bossigny was about to offer him that Captaincy, and his Vulcan sense of duty to his masters was counselling him to accept it. Never mind his overwhelming desire to remain on the Enterprise - that was born out of his treacherous Human half, the Human half which had caused him so much pain at Kirk's apparent death. But recent events had made him face what he had known for a long time. He wished to serve with Jim Kirk, not alone on a ship of strangers. He wished to be content - was that so wrong?

He had reached his cabin by this time and was soon talking to the Admiral.

"Ah, Mr Spock. I am empowered to offer you command of the Minerva."

For a moment time seemed to stand still, then Isadora's words came to Spock's mind.

"Admiral, as I have stated, I have no desire to command."

He did not hear the swish of his office door as it opened and closed.

"I would not be content as the Captain of the Minerva. I am content to serve on this ship as Captain Kirk's First Officer and Science Officer. At our last meeting you talked of the strength of the Enterprise's command team. The strength of that team lies in the sum of its parts. I am one of those parts. As for the Minerva's mission, I will of course make available all Enterprise data on the Galactic Barrier."

Bossigny frowned. "Your presence would be much more effective than a recording. Your duty is to Starfleet, Spock, not to the Enterprise team."

James T Kirk stepped into Bossigny's field of vision, barely controlling his anger.

"Blackmail is not an acceptable means of recruitment, Admiral. Stop trying to use it on Mr Spock."

Spock had been taken by surprise when he heard Kirk's voice. He had neither heard Kirk enter his cabin, nor had he become aware of his presence - a measure of the Vulcan's disquiet. Now he locked eyes with his Captain as he spoke.

"Admiral Bossigny, I state for the record that I do not wish to pursue this commission. I believe that my service on board the Enterprise is the best possible use of material."

Defeated, the Admiral terminated the contact.

Kirk pulled up a chair and sat down, still looking at Spock. "That was

one hell of a compliment you just paid me." Kirk's voice was gentle as he continued, "Are you absolutely sure? They may not offer again." He paused.

"Captain, I find Human illogic confusing and tiring. In my dealings with Humans here, I have you as a referrent. I would not be a good Captain."

Kirk cocked his head on one side: "What about Vulcan illogic, Spock?" He smiled. "You've upset McCoy; he thinks you're cold and unfeeling and he can't square that with your frantic - his word - search for me on the planet when even he was convinced I was dead."

There was a pause while Spock framed his reply. "Vulcans' lives are ruled by logic, which dictates the control of the emotions." He looked directly at Kirk. "But my logic falters where you are concerned, Jim."

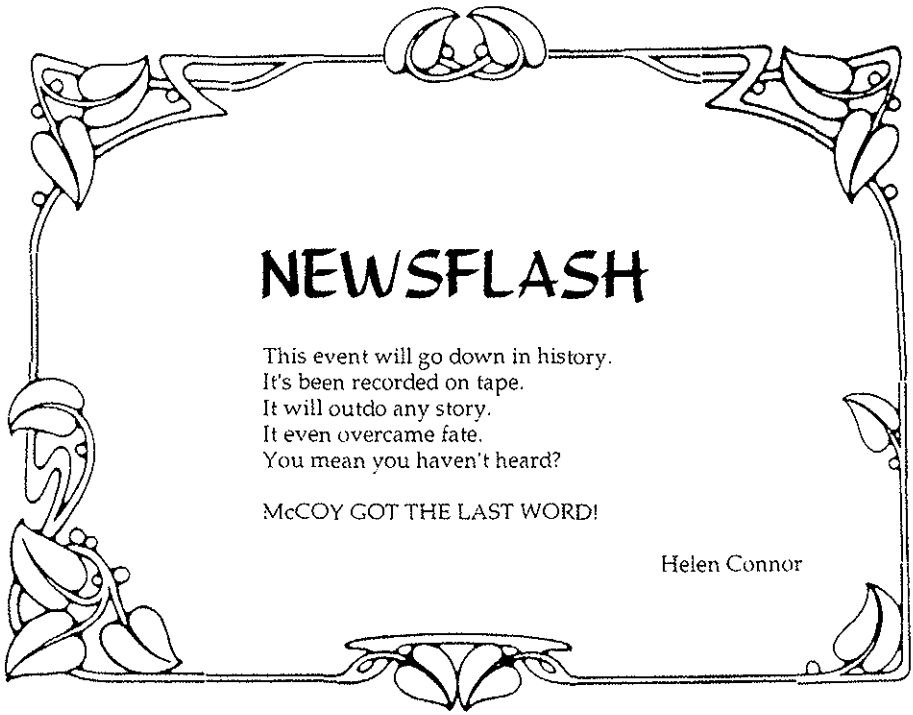
Kirk reached out a hand and touched Spock's shoulder. "I know McCoy can be very acerbic, but actually, I believe he does understand. And you know I do, don't you?"

Spock nodded wordlessly.

Kirk continued, lightening the tone a little for Spock's sake, "Anyway, I'm really glad you didn't give up the search. I would have hated life in that cave, even if I did get to father a whole race!"

He got up to leave, as Spock's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. Reaching the door, Jim Kirk turned. "Spock, I'm glad you're staying. I would have missed your Vulcan illogic."

Spock almost-smiled, as Kirk left.



NEWSFLASH

This event will go down in history.
It's been recorded on tape.
It will outdo any story.
It even overcame fate.
You mean you haven't heard?

McCOY GOT THE LAST WORD!

Helen Connor